

It's A Match!

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Summary:

Eddie Kaspbrak has been single by choice for two years when his best friend, Bill, forces him to download Tinder. Eddie agrees only to appease Bill; it's not like he's going to find anyone on there worth his time, and he's very prepared to swipe left on everyone he comes across.

Richie Tozier, 23 exists only to ruin this plan of Eddie's.

It's A Match!

Author's Note:

Me: I wanna write a cute, short tinder au!!

Also me: writes 30-fucking-K of tinder au...

Warning: themes of past domestic abuse are discussed throughout the fic.

Eddie Kaspbrak isn't particularly interested in dating, for a few reasons.

When he was young, too young to really be thinking about anything even vaguely romantic, his mother warned him off going anywhere *near* girls. "They'll only break your heart, Eddie-Bear," she used to say, clutching him against her podgy chest and stroking his hair. "You're too fragile; it'll only end in tears. The only woman you'll ever need is your mama." He'd believed this to be the gospel truth, as all kids do of their parents words at that age, and studiously cried *ew* and *yuck* any time the girls and boys in his grade would play kiss chase.

As he grew older, he realised it was maybe a little too easy for him to stick to his mom's advice and steer clear of girls. He knew he wasn't interested in them, not in *that* way, not in anything beyond purely platonic and childish friendship. He never thought about holding their hands or kissing them like Bill, Eddie's best friend since Kindergarten, did. He made it all the way to seventh grade thinking that he was just the best son *ever*, his ma would be so proud of him sticking to her words, but then a new kid transferred to their school, and suddenly – suddenly, Eddie was thinking about holding hands and kissing. But he wasn't thinking about doing it with girls.

Of course, Eddie did nothing externally with this information – not in a town like Derry, and definitely not with a mother like his, who often spoke about *those dirty queers*. His mom didn't want him to be dirty, and the way she would say those words... Eddie knew she thought *those* people were the dirtiest of all. It would upset his mama too much if he didn't hide this part of himself, push it down so far

that maybe, eventually, it might just disappear on its own, so that's exactly what he did.

He did an absolutely fantastic job of it for years and years, burying it deep down inside and pretending to agree when Bill would say this or that girl from school was pretty. It was only when he was seventeen, and Bill dragged him to a house party a few towns over where Eddie got absolutely stinking drunk, that his perfectly executed lie of a life began to unravel.

Eddie met a boy, a boy who was in college, a boy who took a liking to little Eddie standing in the corner. Eddie can't even remember this boy's name, but he can remember his touch – his large hands clutching at Eddie's waist, his thigh pressed in between Eddie's legs, his mouth hot and wet against Eddie's. Eddie was three sheets to the wind at this point, not realising or really caring that he was doing *this*, with a *boy*, where anyone and everyone could see them.

When he woke up in the morning on Bill's bedroom floor, Bill was already up and levelling Eddie with his *we are going to discuss this* look. Eddie had instantly freaked out, babbling almost incoherently, talking about how sorry he was, he knows he's disgusting, Bill won't ever have to see him again, sorry, sorry, *sorry*. He'd been shoving his stuff into his rucksack when Bill had caught his arm and forced him to still.

"Eddie," he'd said, eyes soft as he wrapped Eddie into a hug. "It's n-not wrong. You're not disgusting. I just w-wish you'd told me."

Eddie had cried; wracking, sobbing tears against Bill's chest. Years' worth of repression came flooding out – all this time thinking he was sick, he was *wrong*, that he had to hide this part of himself because he'd disappoint everyone around him if he let himself give into it. Yet, here Bill was, holding him and telling it was okay, *he* was okay, Bill has always and will always love him, and this *definitely* wasn't something that could change that.

It gave Eddie the courage to tell his mother. It didn't go as well with her as it had with Bill.

She had screamed and she had tried to hit him. She had attempted to

drag him away to conversion therapy, telling him that no son of hers was going to be sick; no son of hers was going to be this *filthy*. It spurred Eddie on to do what he'd never had the courage to do before – stand up to her. He told her no, he told her the Denbroughs had already agreed to take him in, that they would love him for who he is, not keep him in a glass bubble of fake illnesses and ailments, never letting him be who he really, truly was.

She cried and he finally got away from her.

Dating was still kind of tough after that. It's difficult to just shrug off so many years of stifling his true feelings, to just shrug off how he'd been taught that being gay was synonymous with being sick. It wasn't until his Freshman year of college that he actually kissed another guy. It was another guy he met at a party, a guy called Darren, and instead of being a drunken one-night fool around, it turned into a two year relationship.

Darren was nice, at first. He showered Eddie in affection, spent every waking moment with him. He would call Eddie his soulmate to anyone who would listen, and Eddie would pretend he felt it back, pretend it didn't make him feel sick to hear Darren refer to him that way – like it was a brand of ownership.

As time went on, Darren became less affectionate and more controlling. He would yell and sneer at Eddie whenever Eddie dared to talk back to him, disagree with him on anything at all. He would tell Eddie he was irritating, that Eddie grates on people's nerves just by being himself, that no-one else could put up with him the way Darren can. He would check Eddie's phone to see who he'd been texting, what he'd been arranging to do. If he ever found something on the phone he didn't like, or if Eddie spoke to him in a way he didn't like, he'd get angry.

And Eddie – Eddie would get bruises.

But Eddie did love him, or at least he thought he did, and even more than that, he was scared. So he didn't tell anyone. It only came to light one weekend when he visited Bill at college, and Bill noticed the bruising on Eddie's arms, and demanded to know everything. In a moment so reminiscent of Eddie's last confession to Bill, Eddie

sobbed the details into Bill's chest, apologising for being so weak, saying it was his own fault because he was too mouthy, too annoying. Bill had just held him, assuring him in soothing tones that this wasn't Eddie's fault, not at all, and Eddie certainly wasn't weak.

Bill had driven them back to Eddie's campus that night, gone alone to Darren's place to pack up Eddie's things and told Darren, in no uncertain terms, that he was *never* to go anywhere near Eddie again. When Darren had begun to argue that this was *his* Eddie, Bill didn't get a say in their relationship, Bill had clocked him right in the face and broken his nose.

Childish, maybe, but satisfying nonetheless.

Eddie hasn't seen Daren since, and now he's graduated, working as a nurse and living with Bill in Bangor. He is content with his life, and so maybe actually isn't at *all* interested in dating – not anymore.

He just wishes Bill would leave him *alone* to get on with his happily single life.

"C'mon, Eddie," Bill goads, imploring Eddie with his best puppy dog eyes. Eddie has been immune to that look since they were kids running around a jungle gym, so Bill gives up and sighs instead, leaning back against their kitchen counter while Eddie empties the grocery bags into the fridge. "It'll be f-fun, I promise."

Eddie scoffs. "You can't promise that, Bill," he counters, putting the ice cream into the freezer drawer and closing and leaning up against the door once he's done. "You've been dating Audra since before the freakin' app was invented. You've never even tried it yourself."

"Yeah, b-but people *tell* me it's fun. Besides, w-what's the harm?"

"Do I really need to remind you of my last relationship?" Eddie deadpans, levelling Bill with a look.

"You can't let that asshole s-s-stop you from living your life," Bill says, frowning. "That was t-two years ago and you h-haven't dated anyone since. They're not all bad."

"Well, sue me for not wanting to put that to the test," Eddie retorts, walking from the kitchen into the attached living room and taking a seat on the couch. He switches the TV on, happily prepared for another Friday night of Netflix, but then Bill flops down beside him, grabs the remote, and turns the TV off again. "Hey, I was gonna watch that!"

"I know. For the fifth Friday n-night in a row." Bill is still frowning at Eddie, so Eddie scowls right back. "You're twenty-two. This i-isn't how you should be spending Fridays."

Eddie shrugs. "I'm not into going out. You know that."

"L-look, Eddie," Bill says, placing the TV remote onto the coffee table at their shins and turning to pin Eddie with a look. There's no puppy dog eyes this time; just a look of genuine sadness that Eddie desperately wants to turn away from. "I'm not a-asking you to get i-i-immediately involved with anyone. I'm just asking you to give it a try. I'm just asking you t-to live your life."

Eddie bites his lip, fidgeting with the cuff of his over-worn sweater. His eyes flicker from Bill's face to his own phone in his lap, and then back again. Bill watches Eddie, a look of quiet hopefulness edging into his expression.

"Fine," Eddie agrees quietly, eventually. Bill busts out in a wide grin, already reaching for Eddie's phone and typing in the passcode. "But I'm not making any promises, alright? I'm not promising at *all* that this will be in any way, shape, or form a success."

"I'll t-take those odds," Bill replies heartily, eyes on Eddie's phone as he opens the app store, searches, and clicks the download button. "Now let's s-set you up a profile."

Eddie groans, but allows Bill to open up the now downloaded app and hold the phone in between them so they can both see the fire symbol as it loads. Bill starts the process, connecting Eddie through

Facebook – it’s honestly scary how many of Eddie’s passwords Bill knows – and setting up his location and age ranges.

“No one older than 30,” Eddie warns, watching on helplessly as Bill taps this button and that one. “I’m not looking for a sugar daddy.”

“You’d m-make an excellent sugar baby, Eddie,” Bill says, but does as he’s told and sets within Eddie’s limits. “Wh-which photos do you want to use?”

“I don’t know,” Eddie mumbles, embarrassed. *This* is half the reason he’s never wanted to download Tinder – he doesn’t want to have to *sell* himself. “You choose.”

Bill nods, accessing Eddie’s photos and choosing two recent ones and an older one.

The first one is of Eddie alone, tongue caught between his teeth as he laughs at Bill being stupid behind the camera. He’s wearing the same sweater he’s wearing right now; light pink, loose, soft-looking, with thumb-holes in its sleeves. Eddie doesn’t think it’s a great picture, his nose too scrunched up and his eyes too crinkled at the sides, but he’s not too invested in this process, so he doesn’t complain.

The second one is of Eddie and Bill together that Audra took a few weeks ago. They’re sitting on this very sofa, with Eddie’s feet in Bill’s lap. Eddie is wearing a white t-shirt and the red shorts he’s had since he was fourteen – he’s not grown much since then, to be honest. Bill is grinning widely, thumbs up at the camera. Eddie is scowling, flipping the bird because in that moment, Bill and Audra had been cutting into Eddie’s Friday night Netflix time.

The third one is an older one, taken on Eddie’s first day at work at the hospital. He’s wearing his blue scrubs with a long sleeved grey top underneath. He’s smiling in this one, nerves visible in the tightness of it, awkwardly standing in front of his and Bill’s front door as Bill had *insisted* on a photo to commemorate the day. He looks like an awkward middle-schooler on his first day, and would complain about Bill choosing it – but, again, he’s honestly not too invested in this.

"There," Bill announces proudly. "Now we g-gotta write you a bio."

Eddie groans again. "Do I have to write a bio?"

"Yes. People without b-bios are cocky assholes who think th-their photos do all the talking." Eddie quirks an eyebrow, clearly questioning Bill's knowledge. "Audra's friend told me."

"Whatever," Eddie grumbles. "Write whatever you want."

Bill lifts both eyebrows, a smirk rising on his lips. He takes the phone away from where Eddie can see it and taps his fingers against the screen for a few seconds, only returning it into Eddie's view once he's clicked save. He passes the phone over to Eddie, allowing him to view his profile.

"No changing it," Bill says. "It s-s-sums you up perfectly."

Nurse. 5'4". Tiny ball of fury.

"Bill!" Eddie exclaims, punching him on the shoulder. Bill just cackles, rubbing at his injured limb. "I am *not* a tiny ball of fury!"

"Then w-why are you yelling?" Bill responds. Eddie huffs, going to edit it, but Bill grabs the phone back before he can. "Nope, y-you're not changing it. We're gonna s-start swiping now."

Eddie folds his arms over his chest, petulant, but doesn't try reaching for the phone again. There's honestly no point – if he does try, Bill will just stand up and hold the phone above his head, and Eddie will never get it back, no matter how far up on his tip-toes he stands.

"You are *not* allowed to say yes to anyone I don't okay first," Eddie cautions.

"I won't," Bill agrees, loading up the first profile and holding the phone between them once again. "What about this guy? He's g-got a nice smile."

Eddie shakes his head. "Nah. Crooked teeth."

Bill rolls his eyes, but swipes left anyway.

“Him?”

“*Fuck*, no. Look at those shoes!”

“This one’s h-hot!”

“Bill, it’s a good thing you’re into girls, because your idea of hot guys is *weird*. No, thank you.”

“You’re being v-very overly critical here, Eddie,” Bill says irritably, stopping in his swiping for a second. “H-how would you feel if all these guys were being this h-harsh about you?”

Eddie shrugs. “I literally do not even want to be on this app, so I wouldn’t care.”

Bill rolls his eyes but swipes left, *again*, anyway. Eddie is kind of hoping that if he says no to enough adequate guys, it will sufficiently annoy Bill into just giving the fuck up.

“O-okay, there’s no way you’re not into this dude. H-he is *exactly* your type.”

Eddie’s mouth opens, already forming the word *no*, but it dies in his throat before it can escape.

Bill is, well – he’s kind of right.

Richie, 23, the screen reads.

The picture on display shows a guy on stage, wearing black ripped jeans and a Pixies t-shirt. He has dark hair, curling to a stop around his defined jawline, and an electric guitar hooked around his shoulder. He’s got two hands on a microphone which is pressed against his lips, eyes shut as he clearly sings into it.

He looks pretty cool, is Eddie’s first thought.

He looks like a fucking indie douche, is Eddie’s second.

Eddie has been quiet far too long at this point, and Bill has noticed, jumping on it immediately and scrolling to the next photo. This one

shows the same guy, dressed this time in a garish Hawaiian shirt, open with nothing underneath, exposing his toned stomach, a dark trail of hair leading from his navel into bright tie-dye shorts. There's a girl with him in this one, striking red hair and gorgeous face. Their arms are wrapped around each other as they stand, laughing, in an open field. Eddie can make out crowds of people and a stage behind them, and assumes they're at a music festival.

I wonder if that's his ex-girlfriend, Eddie thinks before he can stop himself.

Bill scrolls once more, reaching the third and final picture. In it, the guy is on his own, standing in what looks to be a *particularly* dive-y bar. He's wearing a plain white t-shirt and grey sweatpants, ridiculously huge glasses framing his eyes and a cigarette in one hand as he laughs at someone off-camera.

"He's okay," Eddie admits quietly. "But he smokes, so – no."

"Eddie, you're c-clearly interested," Bill says, not swiping left. "At least read his bio first."

"I bet he's not got one, with looks like that," Eddie deflects. "He'll be one of those cocky assholes Audra's friend was talking about."

Bill doesn't say anything, but he does scroll to the guy's bio section.

All of my clothes are made of boyfriend material. And they'd look great on your bedroom floor.

"He's funny!" Bill declares.

Eddie scoffs. "He is *not*. He totally got those off the internet. And they're not even *good*, anyway."

"You think he's hot though," Bill says, in no way inflecting it as a question. "S-so we're gonna swipe right."

"We are *not*!" Eddie cries. "You promised you wouldn't say yes to anyone I didn't agree to!"

"I know, b-but I think you *want* to agree to this," he pauses, eyes

moving to the phone for a second, “this Richie guy.”

“I don’t.”

“You do.”

“I *don’t*.”

“You *do*.”

“Fine, whatever, he’s hot!” Eddie confesses, throwing his hands up in the air in irritation. “But he smokes and uses cheesy pick-up lines! If I’m ever going to be with another guy, it’s *not* going to be a douche-y smoker who thinks *that* kind of flirting works on anyone.”

Bill stops. Where he’d been smirking before, his face softens now.

“Eddie,” Bill says sadly. He puts the phone down on the armrest of the couch and leans over, wrapping his arm around Eddie’s shoulder. Eddie doesn’t want to, wants to stay annoyed at Bill’s persistence, but he naturally leans into it anyway. “You d-deserve to be with another guy. You deserve to b-b-be happy. You’re the g-greatest person I’ve ever met and anyone would be *so* lucky to h-have you.”

“Jeez, Big Bill,” Eddie teases. “Why don’t you just date me yourself?”

Bill snorts. “Look, Eddie,” he starts, unwinding his arm and leaning back so he can look Eddie in the eye, “I understand that this m-must be hard, and that you’re scared. I t-t-totally get that a-after – after *him*. But y-you can’t keep picking non-existent faults with every guy in the w-world. You’ve gotta let yourself get back out there.”

“Smoking isn’t exactly a non-existent fault,” Eddie rebuffs, but sighs in defeat anyway. “Okay, fine. You can swipe right on him.”

“Th-that’s the spirit!”

Bill is grinning as his thumb swipes the movement, and as soon as it’s done, a little message appears on the screen, telling them ‘It’s a Match!’ Bill’s grin gets even wider; triumphant.

“Fuck,” Eddie breathes. “Is it always that – that fast?”

“Only when it’s a regulation h-hottie like you,” Bill replies, going to tap the ‘Send Message’ button.

“Hang on,” Eddie says, stopping Bill with a hand curled around his wrist. “I think that’s enough excitement for one night. I – I don’t really feel like chatting to anyone right now, so it wouldn’t be a good idea to strike up a conversation.” Bill looks reluctant, but he hands Eddie his phone back regardless. “Anyway, weren’t you meant to be going over to Audra’s tonight?”

Bill glances at his wristwatch, panicked expression on his face. “*Shit*,” he mutters, standing up and grabbing his overnight bag and jacket from beside the couch. He readies himself to leave and then turns to Eddie, index finger pointed towards him. “We *will* be c-carrying this on tomorrow, you h-h-hear me?”

“Sure,” Eddie complies, sickly sweet smile on his face. “Anything you say.”

Bill looks like he wants to argue, but he totally is meant to be picking Audra up from work in twenty minutes and it’s a thirty minute drive, so he hasn’t really got the time. Eddie knows this – hence the smug smile.

“We *will*,” Bill reiterates, and then walks over and out of their door, calling behind him, “See you t-tomorrow, Eddie.”

Eddie doesn’t bother offering his own farewell, knowing Bill will be pretty much sprinting his way down the stairs, and therefore is likely already out of hearing distance. Instead, he turns the TV back on and settles back against the cushions, more than fucking ready to return to his night as previously planned.

If he maybe glances at his phone for a second, just to see if he’s received a message yet, well – there’s no reason for *Bill* to know that, is there.

It's nearing midnight when Eddie decides that that really *was* the last episode he's going to watch tonight. The credits roll and Eddie hastily switches the TV off, lest the next episode start its auto-play, gluing Eddie to the seat and screen as a result. He's reaching over to the table lamp to cut its light when his phone flashes with a notification.

'Richie sent you a message', it reads.

Eddie feels anxiety pooling in his stomach as the information registers. He slowly and cautiously picks up his phone and opens up the app. *This is ridiculous*, he thinks. *I'm being ridiculous. There's nothing to be scared of, it's just a message!* He tries to tell his heart this, but it ignores him and continues hammering away in his chest.

Taking a deep, shaky breath, Eddie taps the screen and opens up the message.

So ur a nurse? Bc I think you just cured my erectile dysfunction

Eddie literally full-body shivers with repulsion.

"*Fuck*, this guy's a douche," he says aloud, falling back into his bad habit of talking to himself. "I knew he was going to be a douche. I *told* Bill he was going to be a douche."

He catches his bottom lip between his teeth and begins to gnaw, debating whether to ignore, un-match, or chew out this douche. After a few seconds, he decides to go with the latter option.

Have you found that opening with talk of your useless dick has hooked many people so far?

Eddie presses send and locks his phone, turning off the lamp and moving into his room. He throws his phone onto the bed and brushes his teeth, swapping his sweater for a pyjama top when he's done and climbing into bed and under the covers. He grabs his phone again once he's settled and is greeted by the same notification as before – another message.

Ur the only person I've tried it on so u tell me

I don't suggest you try it again anytime soon

Well I won't have to bc I've found you now cutie

Eddie rolls his eyes, fingers prepped to type out a scathing retort, but another message appears before he can.

So do u have a sexy nurse costume for Halloween and shit? Or is anything u wear a sexy nurse costume bc ur sexy and ur a nurse?

You're really hung up on this nurse thing, aren't you? Is it a fetish or something?

It wasn't one I had before 2nite but I think u've changed that now cutie

Eddie scoffs aloud, but there are butterflies swooping in his stomach, replacing the anxiety from earlier. This guy is so *forward*, so direct in his flirtations. Eddie hasn't been hit on for years; he absolutely leaves the house every day with an expression just *daring* people to try. Now that there is someone... it feels good.

But Eddie is no fool. He knows that this Richie guy is probably a fucking pro at this; knowing and using all the lines and compliments in order to get his Tinder hook-ups into bed, then never speaking to them again. Richie is good-looking and clearly coquettish, and Eddie is under absolutely no illusions that he is the first or last person to receive this kind of treatment from this guy.

His phone screen flashing once again breaks him out of his reverie.

So when r u free for me to take u on a date Eds?

That's not my fucking name – and I don't even know you so no time soon

Eds is cute tho. Cute just like u

I'm not cute

I beg to fuckin differ, Eddie Spaghetti. I think u look especially fuckin cute in the shorts from the second pic. And anyone who

describes themselves as a tiny ball of fury's gotta be at least a little adorable

I didn't write that. My friend Bill forced me to get this and wouldn't let me change it. And that's also not my fucking name

Is ur friend Bill the other guy in the shorts pic?

Yeah, why?

Just wanted to check that wasn't my competition for ur heart cutie. So about our date...

Eddie begins chewing his lip again. He stares at Richie's message and considers: could Eddie go on a date with him? Could Eddie just meet up with a total fucking stranger and, what – hope for the best? Richie is definitely good-looking and maybe a little obnoxious, but he is kind of funny, in a juvenile sort of way, and Eddie is quite enjoying being able to insult him and it roll off him like water off a duck's back.

But, no – he's not going to agree to a date.

Not yet, an unhelpful part of his brain chimes. He assiduously ignores it.

I really wouldn't be comfortable meeting up until we know each other a little better

Richie doesn't reply instantly. All of his previous responses had been coming through within seconds, but for this one, Eddie waits two whole minutes – he's watching the clock and everything. Sixty seconds in, he begins to panic a little that Richie's gone off him already, Eddie is playing *too* hard to get. The panic only dissipates when another message pops through.

No problem Eds. I'll work as hard as it takes to win u over. But now, I'm afraid sleep must take me. Goodnight Eds, prepare ur heart for takeover tomorrow morning

Eddie smiles. Small and brief, but a smile nonetheless. If Bill had been there to see Eddie smiling over a guy, he'd be leaping for joy.

Night Richie

Sleep comes quickly to Eddie that night, his head filled with hopeful thoughts of wide grins and dark curls, no matter how much he tries to quash them.

Eddie is woken up in the morning, not by his alarm telling him it's time to get ready for work, but earlier than that, by a heavy jumble of limbs leaping onto his bed and knocking the air out of him.

"What the *fuck*," Eddie shrieks, shoving a cackling Bill off him. Eddie opens his sleep-heavy eyes to see Bill, grinning inanely, getting himself comfortable on the left side of Eddie's bed. "Bill, I am going to *murder you*."

"That threat l-lost its sincerity like ten years ago, Eddie," Bill replies easily. "If you were g-g-gonna kill me, you'd have d-done it by now."

"Yeah, well," Eddie grumbles, groggily sitting up and resting against the headboard, "sleep with one eye open from now on, Denbrough."

Bill laughs again, sitting up as well. Eddie reaches over to his bedside table and takes a swig of water, tapping the home button on his phone to read the time. It's about thirty minutes before his alarm was due to go off, and he internally curses his asshole friend for robbing him of that extra time asleep.

"So," Bill starts, staring intently at Eddie, smile still on his face.

Eddie raises his eyebrows when Bill doesn't offer anything else. "So... what?"

"So," Bill starts again, rolling his eyes, "d-did you message that guy last night?"

"Oh," Eddie says, and his cheeks feel hot, so he ducks his head,

hoping Bill won't have noticed his flush. It's an unlikely notion, if Bill's widening smirk is anything to go by. "He, uh. He messaged me, actually."

"A-and you messaged back, right?" Eddie nods slowly and Bill holds his hand up for a high five, which Eddie returns to with a scoff. "Well, l-l-let me see!"

"I don't know, Bill," Eddie says uncertainly. "It's – it's embarrassing."

"Why is it embarrassing?" Bill asks. "Did you sext him?"

"Bill, what the fuck, of course not!"

"Well, then it c-can't be *that* embarrassing, can it?"

Eddie toys with the fabric of his pyjama top, considering. It is true that they didn't do or say anything embarrassing; there's nothing there that he'd actually *mind* Bill seeing. Besides, maybe it'd be nice to get a second opinion on the whole thing – considering Eddie's relationship history, he's maybe not the best judge of character.

"Fine," Eddie agrees eventually, picking up his phone and opening it up to last night's messages. Before he shows them to Bill, he hedges, "He's kind of, I don't know. Kind of cheesy? And, like, *really* forward. Like, I'm still in two minds over whether I think he's a douche or not." This is a lie Eddie is telling himself as well as Bill; deep down, he knows he's kind of enamoured with Richie's odd charisma. "So – so just warning you."

Bill rolls his eyes, making grabby hands. "J-just show me, Eddie."

Eddie hesitates for a few seconds, and then hands the phone over. His heart is thumping as he watches Bill's eyes scan over the screen for the minute it takes him to read the entire conversation. Once Bill has read it over once, he scrolls all the way back to the top and takes another minute to read it over again.

"So," Eddie says after two minutes have passed. "What do you think? Is he a douche?"

"I don't think he's a douche," Bill answers, turning to look at Eddie.

“I think y-you’re kind of a douche.”

Eddie scoffs; affronted. “How am *I* a douche?”

“You i-insult him pretty much every reply,” Bill explains, pointing to a particular message on the screen with his thumb. “You start by t-telling him his dick is useless, and he s-still responds by calling you cute. I actually think this g-guy might be perfect for you.”

“How the fuck could you be able to tell that from, like, twenty messages?”

Bill shrugs. “Just call it a h-hunch. This Richie dude t-takes your insults well a-and still wants to go on a date with you.”

“I am not *rude*,” Eddie protests, but he knows he’s lying.

Bill opens his mouth to call Eddie exactly that – a dirty liar – but the words don’t get a chance to come out. They are instead cut off when Eddie’s phone makes a noise, alerting them that Eddie has just received another message. Eddie goes to grab his phone back before Bill can read whatever it says, but Bill just holds it out of his reach, reading it before even he can.

“What’s with all the nicknames?” Bill questions, smirking as he hands Eddie his phone back. Eddie snatches it out of Bill’s palm the second he can. “D-do you want me to start calling you Eds, too?”

“Don’t you fucking dare,” Eddie warns, then turns his attention to his phone.

Morning Eds! So what r ur plans on this fine Saturday?

“I th-think he really likes you,” Bill states, watching as Eddie blushes.

“He doesn’t even know me,” Eddie mumbles, staring at the message in front of him. “He’s probably, like, some huge player.”

“Maybe, but I d-don’t think so. I think h-he actually really likes you.” When Eddie levels Bill with an unconvinced look, he shrugs again. “Call it another hunch.”

“Yeah, well, whatever,” Eddie mumbles lamely, then firmer, “Now, go make me a fucking cup of coffee for while I get ready for work, Denbrough. You’ve deprived me of the extra thirty minutes I deserve.”

Bill rolls his eyes, but does as he’s told anyway. Bill stands up from Eddie’s bed and leaves the room, and Eddie hears the whir of the coffee machine after a short time, so he returns his attention back to his phone.

What am I going to have to do to get you to stop calling me that?

He pauses before he sends it, considering playing it cool and waiting an hour or two, not wanting to seem too keen. The simple thought of playing games like that makes his temple throb with the beginnings of a headache, so he just goes ahead and taps to send there and then. He wonders if maybe Richie will be the type of guy to play games like that, and gets his answer when Richie’s reply comes within seconds.

Ain’t nothing u can do, Spaghetti Head, so ur just gonna have to get used to it. Now I’ll ask again – wuu2 2day?

Eddie is, in truth, a little put off by the text speak. This guy is twenty-three and texting like a fourteen year old in the early 2010s. It should be enough to put him off – a *lot* about Richie should be enough to put him off – but he finds himself typing his response anyway.

I’ve got work in a couple of hours so I’m just about to get in the shower

The second he realises what he’s just said, he regrets it, knowing *exactly* what’s going to come next.

Haha without me? ;)

Eddie rolls his eyes, but he does let out a little breath of a laugh at Riche’s predictability.

Jk. I promise I don’t really text like a straight white boi (that much). Mostly bc I’m not straight

You are a white boy though

yougotmethere.jpeg

Eddie laughs again, actually a little ashamed of himself for laughing at such an outdated meme. He takes a break in his messaging, instead getting out of bed and heading into his bathroom, hopping in and out of the shower in ten minutes. He's brushing his teeth and towelling off his wet hair when he picks his phone up again to respond.

I'll reign myself in from mocking the outdated meme usage – what are you up to today?

Ur a good man Nurse Eddie. I've got work later 2nite but I've not decided yet how to spend my day. I'm still in bed rn

Richie's message is accompanied by a picture. Eddie feels a thrum of excitement run through his veins as he opens it.

It's a rather dark photo, clearly taken in a room with little lighting. Eddie can make out half of Richie's face pressed against a pillow, blankets bunched up around his neck. His face is sleep-soft, hair wild as it fans out over the bedding. He looks fucking adorable in all honesty, and Eddie finds himself thinking he wouldn't mind waking up next to that – one day.

Bill has left Eddie's coffee on his chest of drawers, and Eddie begins to sip at it as he gets himself dressed into his scrubs. Once fully clothed, he takes his last gulp from his mug and moves over to his full length mirror, snapping a photo of himself with his middle finger extended. He sends it to Richie quickly before he loses his nerve.

Lazy fucker. What do you do for work?

We can't all save lives for a living, Eds. I work admin at a local radio station. They won't let me on air yet, but I'm gonna get there eventually. P.S. u r literally the cutest person I have ever seen, how tf does anyone ever get anything done when ur around?

That's such a line. I can't say I'm shocked they haven't let you on air yet – if this is the way you talk when you've got time to consider and write down what you're going to say, I can only imagine what you're like when

you're talking out loud

Def not a line cutie, just an honest to god fact. Ur pretty dead on there tho tbh – I didn't get the nickname Trashmouth for nothing

Eddie snorts, walking out of his bedroom.

That definitely suits you

“Wh-what are you grinning at?” Bill asks from where he sits on the couch, smiling smugly.

“Nothing,” Eddie lies, pocketing his phone and grabbing his jacket and keys. “I’ll see you later.”

“Later, Eds,” Bill taunts.

Eddie doesn't bother taking the bait, simply rolling his eyes and letting the door close behind him. He quickly descends the stairs and exits the building, walking the few minutes it takes to reach the bus stop that takes him to the hospital. As he takes a seat inside the shelter, he gets his phone back out and finds a notification telling him he has another message.

Is it too soon to ask for ur number so we can text instead?

Eddie bites his lip. He wants to say yes it is too soon, just on principle, but instead he sends Richie his digits.

Eddie's bus arrives and he gets on, flashing his bus pass and taking a seat near the front. It's only a ten minute journey to the hospital, but he puts his headphones in anyway and presses play on his music. He's been on a pretty big Beyoncé kick recently, so *Lemonade's* opening track starts playing for him as soon as he taps the button. It's interrupted after a minute by an alert telling him he's received a text.

**What's ur surname? So I can save u in my phone properly.
Mine's Tozier**

I'm not giving you my surname. You could be a stalker, or a serial killer

So could u and I just gave u mine

I get the impression your sense of self-preservation is a little off kilter

Eddie takes a second to save the number under 'Richie Tozier'. An urge to search the name on Facebook takes a hold of him, but he decides against it for now.

**Very very possible Spaghetti Man. Can I at least have an initial?
I'll just save u as Eddie Spaghetti if u don't tell me.....**

Well, when you put it that way... It begins with K

Kennedy? King? Ketamine?

Who the fuck has the surname Ketamine?

Ur a very mysterious dude Eddie K, I wouldn't put it past u to be that one of a kind

Well it's not Ketamine, I can promise you that

Eddie looks up from his phone for the first time in a while to find they're at his stop. He gets up from his seat and dismounts onto the pavement, saying his thanks to the bus driver as he exits. His phone buzzes again in his hand as he walks the short distance to the hospital entrance.

It's cool, I'll just find it out from ur mom when I'm banging her next

Lovely – and on that note, I'm about to go into work

Eddie waves his hello the girl on reception, entering the staff changing rooms and depositing his jacket into his locker. He allows himself one last look at his messages before he puts his phone away for his shift.

Have a great day Nurse K! I'll be impatiently counting down the seconds until I can talk to u again

Eddie shakes his head, grinning, and closes his phone in his locker

without replying. The smile on his face lasts a whole hour into his shift, right up until a drunk girl vomits on his shoes. Then it fades, just a little.

Over the next two weeks, they text a lot. Like, a *lot*, a lot.

Most nights, Eddie finds himself falling asleep with his phone in his hands, having battled against encroaching exhaustion to keep his eyes open, just so he can wait for Richie's reply. He finds that he loves waking up in the morning to messages from Richie – even though they are, for the most part, entirely crude and ridiculous. The two of them text about everything and nothing.

Some days, Richie will text Eddie the most inane shit, like his new favourite meme, or how many dogs he saw that day, usually accompanied by pictures. He'll send Eddie a running commentary on his roommate, Bev, making a sandwich: what type of bread she uses, whether she chooses butter or mayonnaise that day. Eddie gets the impression that Richie is a big talker with a small filter, but he finds it endearing rather than annoying – not that he'd ever admit that to Richie, of course.

Eddie learns that Richie wants to be a radio host one day, that he's working his way through from the ground up until they give him his chance. He learns that Richie's hobbies include music, binge-watching TV, and performing vocals and guitar in an indie rock band he formed with a few of his friends about a year back. Eddie doesn't want to find it cool, but he totally does.

Other days, they discuss real stuff.

Eddie knows that Richie grew up in an abusive household, with alcoholic parents who didn't give two shits about him. He knows that Bev is Richie's best friend and has been since they were in middle school, that Bev and Richie have been living together since they were

eighteen, both eschewing college in favour of getting jobs and getting out of their shitty parents' houses. He knows that Richie grew up with untreated ADHD that still hasn't fully gone away, but is much better than it was when he was younger. He only smokes on occasion, just for something to do with his hands when it starts acting up real bad.

Richie knows about Eddie's mom, and about Bill. Eddie has shared pretty much every facet of his life with Richie, but he won't share anything about Darren – the only people in Eddie's life who know about that are Bill and Audra, and Eddie plans on keeping it that way.

Eddie's initial fears that Richie was just a player in it for a one-night deal aren't completely gone, but they're nowhere near as present as they were at the start. Over two weeks of near constant texting, Eddie has definitely developed a crush – which feels a little ridiculous as he's still not actually *met* the guy.

After a week, Eddie was ready to agree to Richie's date, but since that first day of texting, Richie's not mentioned it again even once. Eddie has tried hinting, making sure to mention when he's got nights off, but Richie hasn't taken the bait. Eddie tries this tactic for another week and then decides: if you want something done, just fucking do it yourself.

They have been matched for two weeks and one day when Eddie takes the bull by the horns.

Are you working tonight?

He sends the message as he rides the bus on his way home from his Saturday morning shift at the hospital. He's tired and a little cranky from having been yelled at by a few assholes for trying to do his job, but there's truly no time like the present, so he sends the message

anyway, receiving a reply near instantly.

Eddie!!!! Man I miss u while ur at work. Honestly all those sick bastards can get fucked bc they take u away from me for so long. & no I'm not working 2nite. Y?

Your capacity for empathy toward the ill and injured astounds me, Tozier

He steels himself with a few deep breaths before tapping out and sending his next message.

I was just wondering if you were still up for that date. I'm free tonight, if you are?

Eddie is expecting he'll have a little time to work himself up over what Richie's response might be. He's proven wrong when Richie's reply comes a nanosecond later.

Yes!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Eddie laughs out loud.

You're free then, I take it?

Fuck Yes. Well actually technically I'm not free, I was meant to hang out with Bev. But I'm sure she'll understand – when a man gets the chance to FINALLY meet his soulmate in person, he doesn't let any previous plans get in his way

Eddie feels his stomach tighten uncomfortably a little at that word – soulmate. It reminds him too much of Darren. Eddie, of course, knows that Richie is just kidding, being prone to hyperbole as he is, but it still makes Eddie's skin itch with sudden unease.

He ignores the sensation as best as he can as he responds.

I'll meet you at the bar on Main at 7?

That gives Eddie an hour to get home, get showered and changed, and then back to the bus stop for the journey into town. Maybe in that hour, the horrible feeling settling over him will have dissipated.

Fuck yeah u will. I truly cannot wait to meet u cutie

Eddie puts his phone away without responding to that, finishing his journey in a further five minutes when he walks into his apartment. He shrugs his jacket off and offers a wave to Bill sitting on the couch, Audra tucked under his arm.

“Hey, Eddie,” she greets, smiling warmly.

“Hey, Audra,” Eddie replies, smiling back and taking a seat in the empty armchair that sits parallel to the couch. “Hey, Bill.”

“How was work?” Bill asks.

“Good. Tiring, but good.” He pauses, rubbing a hand over his weary eyes, obscuring his vision as he makes his next admission. “I’m, uh. I’m going out tonight.”

“Oh?” Eddie can *hear* the smirk in Bill’s voice. “W-w-with who?”

Eddie huffs, lifting his hand from his eyes. He notices that Audra has a smirk on her face that matches Bill’s, and considers her a traitor.

“You know who with, Bill,” Eddie says. “Don’t be smug about this.”

“I a-absolutely will be smug about this,” Bill declares, following it up by turning to Audra to say, “Did I tell you that I made him do this? Th-that Eddie’s future happiness will be a-a-all down to me? That he o-owes me a life debt?”

Audra rolls her eyes fondly. Eddie rolls his, too, but not quite as fondly.

“Yeah, you might have mentioned it once or twice, Bill,” she downplays, then next, “I’m really happy for you, Eddie. You deserve this. I hope it goes really well for you.”

Eddie smiles genuinely and stands up from the chair.

“Thank you, Audra,” he says, then points at Bill, “And fuck you, Bill.”

Bill gasps, mock-offended. “And h-here I was, about to o-offer you a

ride to wherever you're going."

Eddie shakes his head. "No, it's fine, I'll get the bus – thanks though. I'm gonna go get ready now."

Eddie escapes to his room before they can ask him anything about where he's going, what they're going to do, what he's going to wear. He doesn't want to have to think about what he's about to do, not yet, and them questioning him will only force that. He shucks his uniform immediately upon closing his door and climbs into the shower, standing under the hot spray for twenty minutes longer than necessary.

His mind is racing with thoughts he doesn't want to have, thoughts he hasn't had about dating since the first time Richie made his stomach swoop pleasantly. Memories flood back to him of harsh, hissed words, of fingers gripping tight, too tight, against him, forcing him to stay where he didn't want to be.

Richie isn't like that, he tells himself, but then again, *You didn't think Darren was like that at first*.

By the time he's showered and dressed, almost on auto-pilot, not putting a single thought into the clothes he chooses to wear; it's time for him to leave. He leaves his bedroom and grabs his jacket and keys once again, opening up the door without looking at Bill or Audra.

"You look lovely, Eddie," Audra tells him.

"Have f-f-fun!" Bill calls out to him.

"Thanks, guys," Eddie says, hoping it doesn't sound as forced as it feels. "See you both later."

On the walk to the bus stop, the one that lasts a mere few minutes, Eddie has to stop to vomit twice. His breathing is laboured and his hands are shaking, the itch to his skin stronger now, almost debilitating. By the time he reaches the empty bus shelter, he can feel tears welling at the corner of his eyes, and is glad nobody is around to witness him like this.

I can do this, he thinks. *I can go on a date with a guy who I know –*

think? – know is nice.

A bus approaches. Eddie feels a panic attack grip him, taking his breath away and making him feel hot all over, sweat beading all over his skin as his mind fogs. He leans forward so that he can put his head between his legs, trying to steady his breathing as much as he can. He's not sure how long it takes before he can sit up again, but the bus is gone when he does.

A second one arrives fifteen minutes later. The exact same scene goes down.

A third arrives, then a fourth, and a fifth. Eddie thinks his phone is going to buzz a hole through his pocket, but he doesn't look at it – can't. Over an hour has passed and Eddie is still sitting on the same bench inside the same bus shelter.

When the sixth bus arrives, Eddie stands up and walks back to his apartment.

"Eddie?" Bill says as soon as Eddie walks through the door. He and Audra are still in the exact same spot, a perfect picture of cuddling relationship happiness. Eddie feels the need to vomit again. "What are you doing h-home so early?"

"He, uh. He didn't show."

Eddie's voice is weak, his throat raw. He hates lying, but there's no way he's telling Bill the truth. He can only hope that any signs of his panic attack are long gone – he hasn't had one in over a year, and he doesn't want Bill to know they might be back again.

"*What?*" Bill demands, voice loud, almost yelling. "Wh-what a fucking *asshole*. I c-c-can't b-believe th-th-th-th –"

"Hey, don't worry about it," Eddie placates, faking a soft smile – Bill's stutter always gets worse when he's angry. Eddie is a terrible person, because he only really feels glad in that moment that Bill has believed him. "It's fine. I'll get over it. I'm going to go to bed now. See you guys in the morning."

Eddie can see on Bill's face that he wants to talk about this, wants to

make sure Eddie is alright – and that's exactly why he rushes into his room and turns the lock before Bill gets the chance. He can hear Bill and Audra murmuring to one another outside, so he turns on some music to drown them out and changes into his pyjamas, lying on his bed with his eyes closed when he's done.

His phone hasn't buzzed for a while from where it lies in his jacket on the floor. After a few minutes of trying to re-learn how to breathe, he sits up and reaches for it, steeling himself to read what's on the screen.

The time on display tells him they were due to meet nearly an hour and a half ago. There are three missed calls, all from Richie, and a fair few of text messages. Eddie opens them up and begins to read them all – the first one is from 18:40, the last one ten minutes ago.

I'm on my way in now. I am honestly so excited to finally get to see ur cute face irl

K I'm here, sitting at the bar. I've got an I < 3 Eddie K sign taped to my back so u'll be able to spot me easily

What do u want to drink?

I got u a white wine, I remember u saying u like pinot grigio – hope that's ok?

Everything ok Eddie Spaghetti? U were meant to be here like 30 mins ago

Can u just let me know ur ok plz?

Eds I'm starting to get worried now. Can u please just let me know ur alright?

Eddie I'm losing my mind a bit here – are you ok??? It's been over an hour

So I've left. I'm honestly not sure if I've been stood up or if something's happened to you. Either way – can you just let me know you're alright? Please?

Eddie feels awful as he reads them, tears welling up again. *I'm so sorry*, he types out, but deletes it before he can hit send. His phone dings seconds later with another message.

So I just saw the little typing bubble, so I know you're ok. I'm glad. I'm sorry if I did something to upset you, I know I can come on a little strongly sometimes. So – yeah. I'm sorry, Eds.

Eddie wishes he'd got on the bus. He wishes he'd showed up at the bar, had a drink with Richie, allowed himself to find out that they get along as well in person as they do over text.

He wishes he was a stronger person. But he's not.

He turns his phone off and doesn't sleep a wink.

The next five days are awful. Bill keeps looking at Eddie with this sad, guilty look in his eyes. Audra does, too, but at least she's a little better at hiding it when she knows Eddie is looking. Eddie wants to be able to tell Bill that there's nothing to feel guilty for, this is absolutely Eddie's fault, not his – but the words die in his throat whenever he considers them for too long. He just can't – *can't* – admit to Bill that Darren is still affecting him like this. Eddie already knows that he was weak for staying with Darren for so long. He can't say aloud that he's still weak, even now, even two years later; that this is still affecting his life so much.

More than anything, he just wishes he'd never agreed to Bill's pleading; wishes he'd never downloaded this stupid app.

He deletes his account the day after he stands Richie up, and he doesn't hear from Richie anymore – no calls, no texts; nothing. Eddie wishes this meant he didn't still think about Richie every day, but unfortunately that's not the case. He misses talking to the guy, misses Richie sending him pointless photos and ridiculous memes, misses having that near-constant source of entertainment you only get

through someone who truly makes you laugh.

He misses *Richie*, all in all. So many times over the last few days, Eddie has found himself hovering over Richie's contact details, insides in turmoil as he desperately wants to get in touch, to apologise. But he chickens out every single time, half too scared to face Richie after the shit he pulled, and half too scared that Richie might ask if they can try another time – Eddie's sure it'll only end in another relapse of panic attacks.

So he does nothing, says nothing. He gets on with his life and ignores the way his stomach swoops every time he gets a notification on his phone, only to be disappointed when it's never Richie.

The following Thursday, Eddie is back at work. Eight hours into his nine hour shift, Eddie can confirm that it has been a *truly* shitty day. The whole shit-show started barely twenty minutes, when a guy off his face on some drug or another had swung for him, missing by barely a centimetre, and it had only gotten worse from there: he's been puked on, spat at, and screamed at more times today than he thinks he has in his whole fucking career up until this point.

The horror continues when his colleague, Jenny, approaches him with her begging face on.

"Eddie," she starts, drawing out the last letter. She probably thinks she's being cute, and maybe Eddie would think so, too, if he were in a better mood. But he's not, so he just scowls at the chart in his hands. "Do you want to do me a huge, massive, life-changing favour?"

"Not really," Eddie replies, not looking up from the paperwork he's filling out. He can still see her shoes in his line of sight, telling him she's not actually fucked off at his negative response, so he sighs heavily and looks up at her. "What? What do you want?"

He tries to keep the snappiness out of his tone and fails miserably.

"So, like, you know how my boyfriend is British and works over in England most of the time?" she says sounding smug, not doing herself any favours in getting Eddie on side. Eddie nods minutely, pointedly

glancing at his wristwatch to get her to hurry the fuck up. “Well he’s flown into town to see me and it’s like a *total* surprise, isn’t he *such* a sweetheart, honestly? Anyway, he’s dropped by to grab a cup of coffee with me, but like, he can’t stay long so I have to go right now, and I know I’m not due a break for another hour, but could you maybe cover me? Please? Pretty please? Pretty please with a cherry on top?”

“*Fine*,” Eddie grits out, mostly just to get her to shut up.

She squeals and claps her hands excitedly. “Thank you Eddie, you’re the *best!*” she exclaims, then shoves a chart into his already full hands, nearly causing him to drop the one he’s already holding. He doesn’t, manages to save them both from the floor, and she carries on without an apology. “There’s a guy in exam room three waiting for a tetanus booster and stitches; that’s his chart. He’s kind of a hottie, so you are *welcome*.”

“Thanks.” Eddie’s tone is dripping with sarcasm, but it goes right over her head as she offers him a wink. “Do *not* be longer than thirty minutes.”

“I won’t!” she promises, already bounding off toward an extraordinarily average looking guy, waiting with gas station flowers by the reception desk. “I owe you one!”

He takes a deep breath as she walks away, muttering under his breath as he makes his way over to the exam room to administer the booster and sutures she should have been doing. He prays to all that is holy that it’s not going to be some bratty kid, or another drunk asshole, and looks down at the chart to see the patient details as he wanders into the right room.

“So, you’re here for a shot and some stitches, Mr,” he begins, reading the chart as he enters. When his eyes register the patient’s surname, his breath stops dead in his throat, meaning he finishes with a choked, “Tozier.”

“Nurse K!” he hears, practically *yelled* despite his close proximity to the source of the voice – which is deep, almost rough and scratchy. Eddie flinches, eyes fixed on the chart in his hands. “What the fuck!”

What I wouldn't give now for a bratty drunk kid hybrid, he thinks.

Eddie slowly lifts his eyes to the patient sitting on the bed and is devastated to find that – yup, that's exactly who he thought it was.

"Richie," Eddie breathes, taking the man before him in properly. "Um, hi."

His eyes rake over the face he has Facebook stalked pretty much every day for the past few weeks, and can't help but think that no photos can do justice to the real, live thing.

Richie is gorgeous, honestly, male-model gorgeous: defined jawline, high cheekbones, long, sloping nose. His hair is messy as all get out, curling wildly in a frame around his face. He's wearing the same glasses he wore in the third photo posted on his Tinder profile, and they give him ridiculous bug-eyes, likely not helped by the fact they are also widened in surprise.

"What the fuck!" Richie reiterates, not quite as loud this time, but not far off.

"You can't swear at me," Eddie huffs irritably. "I'll get security."

"I'm not swearing *at* you," Richie protests. "I'm just – I'm just swearing, *fuck*."

They stare at each for what feels like an incredibly long time. It's likely no more than five, ten seconds, but it feels like an awkward eternity. Richie's face is an open book of expressions: hurt, a little bit of anger, shock above all else. Eddie is careful to school his expression into one as unreadable as possible. It's only when Eddie notices Richie's hand that he is reminded of his job.

There's a gash, almost clean through from one side of his hand to the other, dried and wet blood mixing around the wound. It looks gruesome as fuck, and it's only because of Eddie's extensive experience that he doesn't cringe at it.

"What did you do?" Eddie asks, mostly redundantly as he's already scanning the chart to find the answer Richie gave his earlier nurse. "You – you hammered a *nail* through your *hand*?"

Richie looks sheepish, cheeks burning red. “Uh, yeah,” he admits, using his good hand to rub the back of his neck. “Ikea flat-pack can be a real bitch, y’know?”

“No,” Eddie responds, incredulous. “I don’t know. I swear they don’t even give you nails big enough to do that kind of damage?”

“There were some pieces missing. I improvised.”

Eddie rolls his eyes at the explanation, pulling on a pair of latex gloves and taking a seat on the stool by Richie’s swinging legs. He picks up the needle containing Richie’s booster, lifting Richie’s t-shirt sleeve to expose his bicep so Eddie can decide on an entry spot. It’s not the way he had pictured touching Richie for the first time, with a pair of gloves between his fingers and Richie’s skin, but he’s kind of only got himself to blame for that – what with the standing up, and all.

“How are you with needles?” Eddie asks.

“Uh. Not – not great, to be honest,” Richie confesses, sounding a little shaky.

“Well, maybe now you’ll think next time before you handle big boy tools.”

“There’s so much room for innuendo in that sentence, I don’t even know where to begin,” Richie says, and Eddie has to painfully bite his lip to stop his smile. “And you can’t be being mean to me right now, buddy. I’m literally your patient *and* you stood me up not even a week ago.”

“I’m gonna go on three, okay?” Eddie warns, pointedly ignoring Richie’s last sentence. “One, two –“

Like always, he goes on two.

“Ow,” Richie breathes, likely more on instinct than on the feel of actual pain. “You’re a liar, Nurse K.”

“It stops people flinching away,” Eddie explains, dabbing the droplet of blood with cotton until it’s gone and then covering it with a band-

aid. "Oldest trick in the book."

"Maybe I wasn't talking about today," Richie mumbles, volume fluctuating like he's not sure whether he wants Eddie to hear it or not. Eddie does, anyway, and immediately feels his chest tighten with guilt. "I mean, what happened, man?"

Eddie doesn't answer straight away, choosing to instead ready the equipment he'll need for the stitches. Richie doesn't speak again while Eddie does this, but Eddie can feel Richie's eyes burning a hole into the back of his skull. When Eddie finally does turn back around, Richie is staring at him unabashedly.

"It doesn't matter," Eddie mumbles, hoping Richie will take that answer at face value.

Richie, of course, does not. "It matters to me," he argues, brows furrowing. He allows Eddie to position his hand as required for the procedure to begin, but he still winces as Eddie does exactly that. "Did I do something? I mean, I – I really thought we were getting along great. What happened?"

"It wasn't something you did," Eddie assures, focusing on the task at hand, thankful that he doesn't have to look at Richie's face. "I promise. We – we were getting along."

"Then why didn't you show, man?"

There's no way in hell Eddie is going to tell Richie the truth. Not here, not now, likely not ever. But the guy deserves some sort of explanation – Eddie at least owes him that much.

"I just – I got scared. I haven't dated anyone for over two years. I just – I freaked out and couldn't get myself onto the bus." He pauses, finishing off the stitches on Richie's hand and cutting the surgical suture neatly. He wraps the area in a light bandage and removes his gloves, throwing them away after. He still doesn't look Richie in the eye. "I'm sorry. I should've – I should've let you know, not left you hanging around waiting."

"You shoulda showed up," Richie counters, but he doesn't sound

angry. Eddie finally looks up and meets his eye, Richie offering him a small smile when he does, which Eddie returns in kind. “You missed out on the night of your life, Eddie Spaghetti.”

Eddie huffs a laugh. “Jesus Christ, your nicknames are even more annoying in person.”

“Nah, they’re part of my charm,” Richie says, flexing his injured hand for a second and grimacing as he does, before turning his attention back to Eddie. “But there’s no need to fret, Spaghetti Head. I’ll give you a second chance.”

Eddie scoffs, fighting a smile. “Who says I want a second chance?”

“Common sense.” Richie is grinning as he hops off the hospital bed. “How long until you get off?” He snorts. “*Ha*, get off. Maybe if you play your cards right, cutie.”

Eddie stands up, allowing an eye roll and suppressing a smile. With both of them standing now, Eddie suddenly realises how much height Richie’s got on him – he can’t be much less than a whole foot taller than Eddie. Eddie promptly starts imagining Richie being able to pick him up and *hold* him up, and shoots the thought down before it can make his cheeks burn visibly.

“I finish in about an hour,” Eddie answers, knowing Richie will take this as agreement.

“Fantastic! It’s a date then, Eds,” Richie declares, grinning down at Eddie. Eddie wills himself to stop noticing just how much taller than him Richie is, but it’s a pretty lost cause. “I’ll wait for you in the cafeteria.”

“You don’t have to wait for me in the cafeteria.”

“You’re a flight risk, Eds. There’s no way I’m leaving you unattended.”

Eddie blushes and Richie pats him on the shoulder, going to leave. He catches himself mid-way out the door, rushing back in and right into Eddie’s personal space.

“Um,” Eddie says dumbly. “Can I help you?”

“Just been wanting to know something,” Richie offers vaguely, following his words by taking a hold of Eddie’s ID badge, tilting it up into his eye line. “Kaspbrak. Nurse Kaspbrak. That’s cute, Eds.” He lets the badge go again and winks at Eddie. “Nurse Tozier’ll sound better, though.”

Eddie pushes Richie away at that, but he’s smiling. “Go away, Tozier. I’ll come find you in an hour.”

“You better,” Richie replies, and he probably meant to sound light-hearted, but it comes across imploring, the look on his face open and hopeful, too. “Or I’ll hammer a nail through my hand every day until you finally show up for a date.”

“I promise,” Eddie laughs. “Now I have work to do, so go.”

Richie does, finally, and Eddie doesn’t feel even a hint of the unease he felt those long few days ago.

Eddie clocks off thirty minutes later than his shift is meant to finish; that last patient just would *not* sit still to let him take her blood pressure. He changes into the spare pair of black jeans he keeps in his locker and removes his scrubs top, leaving him wearing just the maroon long sleeved shirt he’d had on underneath and the jacket he’d brought with him today. He takes the time to brush his teeth in the locker room sink and spray some more deodorant and cologne, hoping to hide the hospital smell that he sometimes worries follows him around. He appraises himself in the mirror before he leaves, not one hundred percent happy with what he sees, but as close as he can get without being able to go home first.

As he enters the cafeteria, he immediately spots Richie sitting alone at a table by the window, his back to Eddie. Eddie takes one last look at himself in the glass window of the door, running a hand through

his hair nervously, and then he strides over to Richie with as much faux-confidence as he can muster.

“Hey,” he says, biting back a laugh when his greeting makes Richie almost jump out of his skin. Richie turns to look at him, shock morphing into joy as he takes Eddie in. Eddie can already feel himself blushing under Richie’s excited scrutiny. “Sorry I’m late.”

“You did have me worried for a minute there, Eds,” Richie replies, standing up and throwing his coffee cup into the trashcan beside him. “I thought for sure I’d been jilted a second time.” Richie doesn’t give Eddie time to let another wave of guilt roll over him, instead wrapping his arm around Eddie’s shoulder happily. “You all ready to go then?”

Eddie nods. “Yup,” he confirms, resisting the urge to lean more firmly against Richie’s side. “Where are we going?”

“See, I was kinda hoping for your input there, Nurse K.” Richie’s arm hasn’t moved from its place around Eddie’s shoulders as he leads them towards the hospital exit. Eddie’s resolve to keep from leaning into Richie is fading fast; he can already feel himself sinking further into the touch. “I don’t really know this neck of the woods too well, so I don’t know anywhere to go.”

“There isn’t really anywhere, to be honest,” Eddie admits. “There’s pretty much only a McDonald’s and a sports bar within walking distance.”

“It’s decided then,” Richie says amiably, dropping his arm from Eddie’s shoulder as they walk outside. Eddie feels its loss instantly. “Go, sports!”

Eddie snorts, pointing left to indicate to Richie which direction to walk in. “Were you a cheerleader in high school? Because that sounded suspiciously full of team spirit.”

“Those bitches *wish* they’d had me on their team.”

Eddie lets out a little chuckle, shaking his head in a way that could only be construed as fond. Richie keeps peeking over at Eddie when

he thinks Eddie's not looking, but Eddie keeps doing the exact same thing, so they catch each other's eyes every couple of seconds, both smiling bashfully when it happens.

"How's your hand?" Eddie asks after a moment of comfortable silence.

"It's definitely been better," Richie confesses, holding his bandaged palm upwards between them. "But it got treated by the most talented and gorgeous nurse I know, so I think it's gonna be okay."

Eddie rolls his eyes. "I bet I'm the only nurse you know. And that is *such* a line."

Richie shrugs. "Like I said before, Kaspbrak." He's grinning at being able to use Eddie's surname, Eddie can tell. "It's not a line; just an honest to God fact."

Eddie can feel his face heating up, so he hides it by turning to gesture at the building on their right.

"This is it," he announces, almost embarrassed now as he stands in front of the blinking neon *Coors Light* sign. It's such a dude-bro bar, not a place Eddie frequents on the regular, and Richie is – well, Richie is *kind* of cool, if his music tastes and hobbies and line of work are anything to go by. If Eddie was looking to impress, he's chosen the wrong place for sure. "Sorry it's a bit..."

He trails off, unsure how to finish his sentence. Richie just smiles, blindingly wide, at him.

"All I need's your company, darlin', and it's already the perfect evenin'," Richie drawls.

Eddie thinks that maybe – and it's definitely a maybe – that was meant to be a Southern accent? It's kind of shitty, so Eddie's having trouble deciphering it. Richie wraps his long fingers around Eddie's slender wrist, tugging them inside. The fabric of Richie's bandages itches Eddie's skin slightly, but he most certainly does not pull away.

"What the fuck kinda accent was that meant to be?" Eddie asks, vaguely noting that it's pretty busy inside.

“Why, it’s my Southern Belle voice, sugar plum,” Richie says, affecting the diction once again. He continues the rest of his sentence in his regular voice. “Voices are kind my thing – capital T.”

“Right,” Eddie doubts, not at all convinced. “I think I prefer your normal voice, thanks.”

Richie busts out in a big smile. “I think that might just be the first time you’ve ever complimented me.”

“It is *not*,” Eddie argues, but he knows that actually, that’s a pretty likely truth.

Eddie can’t help but be reminded of what Bill had said – about how even when Eddie spent his whole time insulting Richie, still all Richie wanted was to be able to take him out on a date. *I actually think this guy might be perfect for you*, Bill’s words echo in Eddie’s brain.

Richie directs them towards one of the only empty booths in the place, sliding onto the bench opposite where Eddie sits. He leans over the back of his seat to grab two menus from the table behind them – he doesn’t ask the people sitting there if they mind, but they don’t notice him anyway, as fixated on the game playing on the TV as they are – handing one over to Eddie as he returns his butt to his seat.

“You hungry, Eddie Spaghetti?”

Eddie accepts the menu, nodding as he begins to look at its contents. “Starved.”

“Me, too,” Richie agrees wholeheartedly, beginning to waggle his eyebrows ridiculously behind his huge glasses. “I could definitely go for a little pasta right now.”

Eddie scowls. “Was that a height joke?”

Richie barks out a laugh. “It wasn’t meant to be, but I appreciate the interpretation all the same.” Eddie huffs, turning his attention back to his menu and only looking back up when Richie’s fingers catch him by the chin, tilting his head. “I like that you’re short, Eddie. It’s part of what makes you so irresistibly adorable.”

Eddie can feel his cheeks going pink, and whilst he hates how much he's blushing around Richie, it also feels kind of nice. Nice to feel wanted; to feel wanted by someone who he wants back just as badly. He knows Richie has caught his blush – probably his hundredth of the evening already – because he's smiling smugly.

"I'd rather be short than a lanky streak of piss," Eddie retorts, and Richie full on belly laughs.

"*That* is not something I've ever been called before. But I like it. Spaghetti Man getting all the chucks in tonight, eh?"

Eddie raises an eyebrow at the use of the word 'chucks', but decides not to comment on it.

"What are you getting to eat?" he asks instead.

"Probably the wings," Richie answers, folding his menu closed. "Wings are always amazing in sports bars."

"That's a very good point." Eddie hums, scrunching his nose up as he makes his own choice. He glances up after a few seconds and catches Richie staring at him, lips slightly parted. He blinks when he notices Eddie catching him and turns his eyes down to the table. "Why are you staring at me?"

"You, uh," Richie mumbles, looking back up and tapping his thumb against the metal napkin holder on the table a few times. "You just looked really cute, just then. With your nose all scrunched up."

Eddie smiles, a bit confused. "Why'd you look so embarrassed? You call me cute, like, every five minutes."

"Yeah, I know. But – but it made me really want to kiss you. Like, right that second."

"Oh," Eddie breathes, mouth a perfect O.

"I mean, I've pretty much wanted to kiss you since the second we first matched," Richie rambles, seeming to lose control of his mouth, hands gesticulating a little wildly. "You've got a very kissable face there, Eds. I'm sure people have told you that before."

“No,” Eddie breathes again, mouth still that perfect O. “Nobody’s ever told me that before.”

“Well, then.” Richie is bright red. “They’re fools.”

“Who is?”

“Just. Everyone who met you before me and didn’t take the opportunity to snap you up that instant.” Richie’s face is so red; it’s rivalling the tomato soup the guy on the table over from them is slurping. “I think I’m gonna stop talking now.”

Eddie bites his lip. “I never thought I’d be saying this, but... I kinda don’t want you to stop talking.”

“I’m definitely never going to let you forget that you said that,” Richie promises, laughing softly.

“Yeah, well I’m never letting you forget that you called my face kissable,” Eddie promises right back.

They gaze at each other, both smiling these soft, sappy smiles, only stopping when the waitress arrives to take their orders. Richie orders his wings, and Eddie orders a cheeseburger with fries, and they both order a pitcher of beer to share.

The conversation flows easily after that; almost scarily easily. If Eddie had had time before this to worry about whether their real life conversation would flow as easily as their texting conversation, he’d be being proven wrong with every effortless topic they move onto, moving seamlessly from one to another.

It truly feels like they’ve known each other their whole lives with how naturally they are able to converse with one another. So natural, in fact, that they don’t realise how much time has passed until the waitress politely points out to them that they are, in fact, the last people in the bar, and they’re actually closing up now. Eddie apologises to her and they pay their bill. Richie tries to pay for everything, but there’s no fucking way Eddie’s allowing that, so they end up splitting it straight down the middle.

As they stand up from their booth and make their exit, Eddie feels a

little tipsy, and that's probably why he feels bold enough to twine his fingers through Richie's once they're through the doors and outside. Richie turns to Eddie with the widest smile when he does this, and Eddie can feel Richie holding on for dear life.

"So," Richie starts as they stand outside in the chilly early Fall air. "My place or yours?" Eddie's hesitation, tinged with anxiety, must show clearly on his face, because Richie hurriedly follows it up with, "Kidding, I'm kidding – honest. I wouldn't do that on the first date." Eddie just raises an eyebrow, unconvinced. "Okay, maybe I definitely would, but I know you actually wouldn't."

"No," Eddie confirms. "I wouldn't." He pauses, tracing his thumb against Richie's knuckles where they are still holding hands. "I had a really great time, though."

"Yeah?" Richie sounds so elated at that notion, Eddie feels his heart almost burst with happiness. "I did, too. A really, *really* great time. Almost as good as my first date with your mom."

Eddie rolls his eyes, pushing Richie away with his free hand. Richie doesn't go very far, getting right back up into Eddie's personal space almost instantly. Eddie doesn't push him away again.

"You really know how to ruin a moment, don't you, Tozier?"

"It is a gift," Richie replies as Eddie pulls his phone out of his pocket to order an Uber, and Richie does the same. "Mine's five minutes away."

"Mine too," Eddie says, putting his phone back away.

"Whatever could we do to pass the time?" Richie asks coyly, tongue caught between his teeth. Eddie ducks his head in a laugh, shivering slightly in the cold winds. "You cold, Eds?"

Eddie shrugs. "A little, I guess."

Richie lets go of Eddie's hand, moving to instead grab the lapels of his jacket. He pulls them away from himself, opening it up.

"C'mere then," he offers, and Eddie doesn't even hesitate,

emboldened by the buzz of alcohol in his system. He wraps his arms tightly around Richie's waist, resting his cheek against Richie's chest. Richie's arms envelop Eddie's shoulders and he rests his chin on the top of Eddie's head. "See, Eds. You're the perfect height for us to be able to do shit like this."

Eddie chuckles. "There are some things it could get in the way of, though."

"Oh, yeah? Like what?"

Eddie pulls his head away from Richie's chest, not disconnecting any other parts of their bodies in the movement. He tilts his head up as far as he can, watching as Richie tilts his down. It must be hurting Richie's neck, as it's certainly hurting Eddie's, but he doesn't look like he's anywhere near complaining.

"You're a little too tall to kiss," he whispers, standing up on his tip-toes, still not quite tall enough to reach Richie's lips without a helping hand. "See?"

"Eds, baby," Richie whispers back. "All you gotta do is ask."

And then he leans down to close the gap between them.

Richie's mouth is warm and insistent, his too-big hands clutching Eddie harder against him. A soft, fluttering breath rushes out of Richie's nose when Eddie sneaks his hands underneath Richie's t-shirt, palms flat against the soft skin of his bony hips. His glasses press kind of painfully against the bridge of Eddie's nose, but Eddie barely notices, too caught up in the kiss itself to care.

Eddie feels enveloped entirely by Richie – his arms, his mouth, his everything – and the whole world can go to hell in a hand basket for all he cares, as long as it doesn't drag him out of this wonderful, hedonistic moment while it does.

A car horn sounds, startling them apart, at the same time Eddie's phone begins to ring in his pocket.

Eddie chuckles softly. "That'll be my ride."

“And here I was, hoping I could be your ride for the night,” Richie teases, eyes fixated on Eddie’s lips. Eddie laughs again, reluctantly moving out of Richie’s embrace, but not going to the waiting car straight away. “I really hope we can do this again, Eddie.”

Eddie nods immediately, smiling. “Yeah, we can. Definitely.” He leans up again, using a hand fisted in Richie’s jacket to pull him down to an adequate level, and presses a quick kiss to Richie’s cheek. “I’ll see you soon, Richie.”

“You can absolutely count on it, Kaspbrak,” Richie vows. “Let me know when you get home safely.”

Eddie’s lips tingle the whole journey home.

Bill is still awake when Eddie gets home, lounging on the couch with the credits to some horror movie he’s seen a million times rolling on the TV screen. He sits up a little straighter when Eddie comes in, rubbing at his eyes tiredly.

“Hey,” he mumbles, frowning at Eddie slightly. “Everything okay? You were due home h-hours ago. I was starting to get w-worried.”

“I’m fine,” Eddie says, shucking and hanging up his jacket. He taps a quick message out to Richie letting him know he’s home and then takes a seat on the couch beside Bill, leaving his phone on the coffee table in front of them. “Just went out for a drink after work.”

Bill’s frown doesn’t go away. “You n-never go out after work. You’re always b-bitching about your co-workers. You hate them.”

Eddie huffs. “I do not,” he protests. “You’ve got such a low opinion of me, Big Bill.” Bill raises an eyebrow, knowing he’s right so not backing down. Eddie huffs again. “I didn’t go out with anyone from work.”

“Then who’d you go out with?”

Eddie bites his lip, fiddling with the blanket covering Bill’s legs.

“Richie,” he admits after a moment’s silence.

Bill’s eyes widen. “Wh-*what*? Wh-why the fuck did you g-g-go out with th-that *asshole*?” he demands, stuttering worse through his anger. “H-he stood you u-up, Eddie. Why the fuck a-a-are you g-giving him a-another ch-chance?”

Eddie is painfully aware in that moment that he’s lied to Bill for nearly a week now. Bill has been there for Eddie through thick and thin: through his mom’s MDBP, through his issues coming to terms with being gay, through his abusive relationship with Darren. Eddie knows that Bill has never lied to him, that he absolutely never would, and a fresh wave of shame crashes over him at the fact he hasn’t been able to return the favour.

“I lied,” Eddie confesses, looking down at his lap so he won’t have to see Bill’s hurt expression. “He didn’t stand me up. It – it was the other way around, actually. He – he said something that reminded me of Darren.” Eddie hears Bill take a shaky breath in at that, so he looks up at Bill, shaking his head quickly. “No, *no*, not – not that like *that*. He just – he called me his soulmate. I know he was just joking and being dramatic, but it – it reminded me of when Darren used to parade me around and tell everyone I was his soulmate. The way he used to say it... It felt like he thought that meant he owned me. I guess hearing that word... It just freaked me out. Even though it didn’t feel at all like that with Richie.”

“Eddie,” Bill breathes as soon as Eddie is done, pulling Eddie into a quick hug.

“I know, I know,” Eddie mumbles, hoping he doesn’t sound as choked up as he feels. “I shouldn’t let it affect me anymore. I know I’m just being a coward, like always. I mean – just that word and the mere *thought* of getting involved in anything romantic again sent me into a panic attack. It’s a joke. I’m a joke.”

“Eddie, *no*,” Bill assures firmly, making Eddie look him in the eye.

“You’re n-not a coward and you’re certainly not a j-joke. *None* of this is your fault and I d-d-don’t ever want to hear that you’re th-thinking like that again, okay?” Eddie nods minutely. “Okay. Have your p-panic attacks started up again?”

Eddie shakes his head. “No, it was just a couple on the same day.” He pauses to let out an embarrassed laugh. “At the bus shelter, of all places. So humiliating. I used to *hate* it when they happened in public. The second you come back to yourself, you feel so awkward.”

“You’ve got n-nothing to be embarrassed about.” Bill pauses, brows furrowing as he searches Eddie’s face. “Do you p-promise me that was the o-only time?”

“I promise.”

Bill seems to find the truth in those words, so he doesn’t push it any further.

“Okay.” His expression lifts slightly, a smile quirking onto his lips. “S-so how come you went out with him tonight? He m-must *really* like you, t-to give you a second chance after you d-ditched him like that.”

Eddie squirms in his seat. “I don’t know about that,” he mumbles, but Bill doesn’t look convinced. “He came into the hospital today. As a patient, not a stalker, don’t worry.” He pauses to roll his eyes, not able to stop the affectionate smile from appearing on his face. “He hammered a *nail* through his *hand*, Bill. Whilst building *Ikea furniture*. I mean – what a fucking dumbass, right?”

“Right,” Bill reiterates, eyeing Eddie dubiously, clearly able to see straight through his harsh words and into the truth: that Eddie actually really, truly likes this guy. “And h-he asked you out again?”

“Yeah. He waited around until my shift was finished.” Eddie chuckles. “He said I was a flight risk.”

“I c-can kinda see where he’s coming from,” Bill says, laughing lightly at Eddie’s scowl. “A-and you had a good time?”

“Yeah,” Eddie breathes, smiling genuinely. “I did. A really good time. I – I think I actually really like him, Bill.” He ducks his head

coily. "We, uh. We kissed. At the end."

"S-so you think you can see a future with this Richie guy?" Bill asks, smiling smugly.

Eddie shrugs one shoulder. "I don't know," he hedges. "It's too early to tell, isn't it?"

Bill shrugs back. "When you know, you know. A-and I think you know, Eddie."

Maybe, Eddie thinks, is about to say, but he is interrupted by his phone buzzing on the coffee table. He picks it up, ignoring Bill's smug, knowing look, and reads the new message.

I really did have a great time 2nite Eds & I really wanna see u again. I'm playing a gig at the bar on washington tomorrow at 8 if ur free to come watch? My roommate's gonna be there with her bf. U can bring ur friend Bill if ur worried about being the odd 1 out. I don't think I can wait longer than 24hrs to see u again tbh

Eddie reads the message over a few times, grin growing more stupid with each scan of Richie's open, unabashed interest.

"He wants to see me again," Eddie tells Bill, knowing he'll only ask annoyingly persistently if Eddie doesn't immediately volunteer the information. "Tomorrow. He's invited me – us, actually – to come see his band play at a bar."

"H-his band?" Bill asks, shit-eating grin plastered on his face. "You're t-totally into the whole indie rocker thing, are-aren't you? Are you gonna be his g-groupie?"

Eddie rolls his eyes. "Fuck off, Big Bill," he snaps with no real heat – aside from the blush burning up his cheeks at being caught out. "Will you come with me? He says his roommate and her boyfriend are going to be there. I'd be too nervous to go and meet them both for the first time on my own."

"Okay, sure," Bill agrees easily.

Eddie smiles in thanks, sending his reply then and there.

Yeah, sure. Bill and I will be there

He hesitates for a second before sending another message.

And I don't want to wait to see you again, either

Eddie can tell Bill's seen what he's written, as the smirk still sits proudly on his face.

"I'm going to bed," Eddie announces, standing up and resisting the urge to flip Bill off for his smugness. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Sw-sweet dreams, Eddie," he calls at Eddie's retreating back, then under his breath, "Sweet dreams of *Richie*."

Eddie doesn't resist the urge to flip Bill off this time.

Eddie fusses *far* too much over what he wears the following night. He changes outfits at least fifteen times, um-ing and ah-ing over this shirt or that one, black jeans or blue, to wear a sweater and sweat inside or to not and freeze outside. Eventually, Bill forces him to decide on a light blue button-up with the same black jeans he wore yesterday. Eddie frets in Bill's passenger seat the whole journey there that he's not wearing the right thing.

"What if I'm over-dressed?" Eddie worries, fiddling with the open top button of his shirt. "This is a *gig*, Bill. Do people wear button-ups to gigs?"

Bill rolls his eyes for what's probably the hundredth time that car journey. "O-of course they do, Eddie," he assures, sounding somewhat vexed. "This is a m-music show at a bar, not Studio 54. S-s-stop panicking, what you're wearing is *fine*." He glances over at Eddie. "I'm not so s-sure about the fanny pack, though. I thought

you'd stopped w-wearing that thing?"

Eddie flushes, hoping the darkness of the evening hides it. "I just need it for – for stuff. For stuff I need for tonight."

"Stuff?" Bill questions, peering over at Eddie suspiciously – clearly it's not quite dark enough to be on Eddie's side tonight. "What stuff?"

"Just," Eddie mumbles lamely, steadfastly staring out of the window, "stuff." Bill's scrutiny doesn't waver, so Eddie huffs before answering properly. "Just, like, a toothbrush. And – and some spare underwear."

Bill gapes for a second, and then bursts out laughing so hard, Eddie's worried he'll crash the car.

"Holy *shit*," he breathes, still almost choking on his laughter. "Who are you and wh-what have you done with Eddie Kaspbrak? You're p-planning on going *home* with this guy?"

Eddie fidgets in his seat. "I'm not *planning* on it," he argues, scowling. "I'm just being prepared."

"Prepared to get d-dicked down."

"Fuck off," Eddie bristles. "Quit making fun of me."

Bill's laughter quietens into a softer chuckle. "I'm n-not making fun of you, Eddie. I'm happy f-for you. Honest. I'm g-g-glad you're getting yourself back out there."

"Stop fucking laughing at me then," Eddie says, but there's no real heat to it. "I think that's the place. Park up here."

"Yuh-yes, sir." Bill mock salutes, but dutifully pulls over and parks anyway. They both exit the car and can already hear music coming from inside the bar. Eddie glances at his watch and notes that they're twenty minutes early still. "You r-ready?"

Eddie takes a deep breath. "Yeah," he decides after a few seconds. "Let's go in."

The both hand their IDs to the bouncer upon request – Eddie knows that Bill only ever gets carded when he's with Eddie, and it irritates the life out of Eddie – and then walk into the bar. It's not one that Eddie's been to before, and Eddie vaguely recognises that it seems to be the dive bar from one of Richie's Tinder pictures.

It's dark inside, dark enough that it takes a few seconds for Eddie's eyes to adjust. When they do, he registers that it's pretty busy inside; they're not all packed in like sardines, but it's busy enough that the chatter is audible above the music playing from the overhead speakers.

"Drink?" Bill asks.

"Yeah," Eddie agrees, moving towards the bar with Bill in tow. At the bar, they get served pretty quickly – vodka soda for Eddie, regular soda for Bill – and then turn around to face the room once again. "I can't see Richie."

"He's probably b-backstage," Bill says, eyeing Eddie knowingly. "Does the idea of your r-r-rock star backstage get you a-all hot and bothered?"

Eddie's scowl and scathing retort is cut off by the guy standing next to them at the bar.

"Sorry," the guy starts, smiling apologetically. Eddie notes that he's pretty good-looking; tall and kind of stocky, wearing it well. "I don't mean to interrupt, but – did you just say Richie?"

Eddie flushes, worried that this guy clearly knows Richie and also *definitely* heard Bill teasing Eddie about him.

"Um, yeah," Eddie confirms.

The guy smiles brightly. "You must be Eddie," he says, extending his hand in a handshake that Eddie reciprocates. "Richie said you'd be coming. He wouldn't shut up about it, actually." The guy laughs, and Eddie finds himself laughing, too. "And you must be Bill."

"I am," Bill verifies, partaking in his own handshake with this guy. "Sorry, a-and you are?"

“Oh, sorry! I’m Ben. Beverly’s boyfriend.”

“Oh! Hi! Richie’s told me a lot about you,” Eddie offers. “Is – is he around?”

Eddie ignores Bill’s badly hidden snort into his drink.

“He’s backstage,” Ben clarifies. “Like Bill said.” Ben winks at Eddie, causing Eddie to blush scarlet again. “Bev’s around though – she’s dying to meet you.”

“Dying to meet who, babe?” a woman asks – and she must be Bev, with her stunning looks and vibrantly red hair, tied back in a ponytail. Eddie recognises her from Richie’s photos and thinks, similarly to with Richie, that they do not do justice to the real thing. “Hi, I’m Bev.”

“This is Eddie,” Ben introduces, gesturing towards him. Eddie waves awkwardly, an even more awkward smile on his face. “And this is Bill.”

“Eddie!” Bev exclaims, grinning wildly. “It’s so great to finally meet you! Richie talks about you so much. Honestly, if I thought it was bad before he met you in person, it’s *nothing* compared to how he came home last night. I think you’ve really done a number on our boy.”

Eddie had been almost sick with worry all day that Bev wouldn’t like him, if not only because he actually did stand Richie up last week, on a date *he* asked to happen. But in the face of Bev’s apparent happiness to meet him, Eddie’s worry fades into non-existence.

“Hi,” Eddie greets, feeling suddenly shy. “It’s really nice to meet you, too.”

“And it’s great to meet you, too, Bill,” Bev tacks on, looking a little guilty at having neglected Bill’s presence. “Can I get you guys a drink?”

“No, th-thank you,” Bill declines politely. “I’m driving.”

Bev nods, turning to Eddie expectantly.

“Uh, yeah, sure. Thanks,” Eddie fumbles over his words a little bit, placing his empty glass onto the bar-top. “I’ll have a vodka soda, please.”

Bev grins. “A beer and two double vodka sodas, please,” she tells the barman, eyes dancing with excited humour. “And also three shots of your worst tequila.”

“Oh, God, please no,” Eddie begs, but it’s not real and everyone knows it, mostly as Eddie says it whilst reaching for the shot glass placed in front of him. “I don’t want to get hammered tonight.”

“Yeah, Eddie’s a sl-slutty drunk,” Bill tells Bev and Ben, smirking as he nudges Eddie with his elbow. “B-but you’re all prepared for that tonight, are-aren’t you, Eddie?”

“Shut *up*,” Eddie hisses, offering an embarrassed smile to Bev and Ben, hoping they don’t catch onto Bill’s implication. If Bev’s matching smirk to Bill’s is anything to go by, she definitely has caught on, so Eddie deflects by holding his shot glass to hers and saying, “Cheers!”

Eddie, Ben, and Bev all down their shots at once. Eddie grimaces at the burning sensation hitting the back of his throat when he swallows, vowing immediately that there’s no way he’s doing any more of *those* tonight – a vow he knows he’ll break after a couple more vodka sodas. He’s not got work tomorrow; sue him.

Movement on stage draws their attention, and Bev whoops loudly as four guys walk on. Eddie squints, trying to figure out which one is Richie through the harsh lights bearing down on the area, eventually realising it’s the guy closest to the front, guitar across his chest as he adjusts the microphone to his height. Eddie notices he’s not wearing his glasses tonight, and is also vaguely pleased to realise that Richie’s injured hand is the one holding the guitar neck instead of strumming its strings.

“Have you ever heard him play?” Bev asks, leaning into Eddie’s ear.

“No,” Eddie replies, shaking his head. “Is he good?”

“Yeah,” she says easily. “But don’t ever tell him I said that.”

Eddie laughs as the sound of electrical feedback fills the room for a few seconds, followed by a voice he recognises amplified around them.

“Hi, guys, thanks for coming,” Richie is saying, but Eddie is barely paying any attention to his words, too busy feeling tingly as he watches Richie be all ridiculously *cool* on stage. “We’re Bucky Beavers, and we hope you fuckers enjoy the show.”

A drum beat starts as soon as Richie finishes his last syllable, and then the rest of the instruments come in, Richie’s guitar seemingly the loudest of all. Bev is cheering wildly beside Eddie, and Eddie feels himself giggling giddily as they launch into their first song.

It’s either an original or something Eddie’s never heard before, and it sounds good. A bit too heavy on the bass guitar for what Eddie’s usually into, but he can recognise a nice melody and lyrics when he hears them. He can especially recognise them when they’re being sung by Richie’s, whose voice is deep and raspy, almost soulful.

Pretty much the whole set is like that for Eddie, with him not recognising any of the songs. At a pause between songs halfway through, Eddie leans over to Bev to ask, “Are these originals or is my music knowledge just shitty?”

“They’re originals. Ben helps them with the lyrics sometimes,” she explains proudly.

Ben blushes. “*Sometimes*,” he clarifies, looking adoringly at her when she blows him a kiss. “Richie writes the majority of it. I only help when he gets stuck on a verse here and there.”

Eddie feels himself go a little weak the knees, embarrassingly, and doesn’t look when Bill smirks at him.

The final two songs are ones that Eddie’s heard before. The first is *I Heard It Through The Grapevine* – though it sounds more punk than the Marvin Gaye original – and the second is Blur’s *Coffee and TV*.

As their final song comes to a close, Richie high fives each band member and then moves back to the microphone.

“We’ve been Bucky Beavers – goodnight, mother fuckers!”

Eddie huffs out a laugh as he claps enthusiastically, everyone in the room doing the same. Richie exits the stage with the rest of the band, and Eddie feels a little flustered with just how into the show he’d been.

“Good, huh?” Bev says, nudging Eddie with a grin on her face.

“Yeah,” he admits, blushing, hoping that she’ll assume it’s simply because of the overwhelming heat of the room. “It was good.”

“I th-thought it was great,” Bill joins in. “I c-can’t believe those are originals.”

They all hum in agreement. Bill, Bev, and Ben all stand with their backs to the bar, leaning against it, whilst Eddie stands opposite them all with his back to the stage.

“Ben, babe,” Bev exclaims suddenly, eyes twinkling. “Come with me for a smoke? You too, Bill.”

“Sure,” Ben agrees, and why are his eyes doing the same thing as Beverly’s?

“O-okay,” Bill says, and okay, this is weird now.

“You don’t even smoke, Bill,” Eddie interjects in confusion.

“Maybe I j-just want some fresh air,” Bill says, already being pulled away by Bev. “See you l-later, Eddie.”

Eddie watches them go in total confusion, his face must be an absolute picture of it. Still, he takes their space at the bar and leans into it, trying to catch the now busy bartender’s attention. So absorbed in his task is he, that he jumps out of his skin at the feel of a wrapped-up hand against his hip.

“Buy you a drink, cutie?” the hand-owner requests, and Eddie would turn around and chew the guy out for touching him out of nowhere if he didn’t recognise the voice instantly – Richie. “You’re lookin’ awful lonely, sugar.”

Eddie swivels around, making sure not to knock Richie's hand from its position on him. Richie is smiling brightly and Eddie is returning it enthusiastically.

"Your friends and Bill have abandoned me to go smoke. I think they saw you coming and thought they were being slick."

"Oh, they definitely saw me coming," Richie discloses, moving a little closer. "I was mouthing *fuck off* at Bev my whole way over here."

Eddie laughs. "Real nice, Trashmouth," he admonishes, using Bev's nickname for Richie – it's just too damn apt to not utilise. "But I will take you up on that drink."

Richie grins, ordering them two more of whatever Eddie's having. Eddie is four drinks and one shot deep now, and he can feel himself getting a little tipsy – nothing overboard, and he'll definitely remember everything in the morning, but just that drunk kind of happy, where everything's a little fuzzy and endearing.

"So," Richie starts when they've both got fresh drinks in hand. "What did you think?"

Eddie pauses, pretending to think. "It was okay," he says after a minute, laughing when Richie clutches at his heart, pretending to be physically wounded by the words. "Fine, *fine*. It was great. You know it was great. You're great."

Eddie physically cringes; he hadn't meant to say that last part.

"Oh, *really*?" Richie drawls, clearly loving it. "Who's greater? Me or the band?"

"*Definitely* that drummer," Eddie snarks, faking scanning the crowd in the room. "What's his name? Is he single? I'm thinking of making a move."

Richie tuts. "Oh, Eds. You're fooling no-one." He removes the bandaged hand that had been resting at Eddie's waist and curls it into Eddie's hair, tilting Eddie's head up towards him. "We all know you're hopelessly devoted to me."

“You wish, Tozier,” Eddie retorts, but his words mean nothing at all, because he’s already on his tip-toes to get closer to Richie’s mouth. “You fucking wish.”

Richie chooses to respond, not with words, but with the gentle press of his mouth against Eddie’s. When Eddie fists his hands into Richie’s hair, it gets a little less gentle.

An obnoxious wolf whistle sounding beside them drags them apart, but not by much at all.

“Evening, boys,” she giggles, twinkling eyes flicking between the two of them – and not having to do much movement, due to how close they are to one another. “Having fun?”

“We were before you so *rudely* interrupted us, Ms Marsh,” Richie says, but there’s no bite behind it. “What happened to chain-smoking Bev? I liked her. She’d have given me more Eddie Spaghetti time.”

Bill snorts. “Eddie Spaghetti?” he questions, eyebrows raised at Eddie. “C-can I start calling you that?”

“Absolutely fucking not,” Eddie asserts, untangling himself from Richie’s hold. He ignores the way Richie pouts at him when he does, making grabby-hands at him. “Bill, this is Richie. Richie, Bill.”

“Hi!” Richie basically yells, slapping Bill’s extended hand out of the way so he can hug him instead. Bill, bless his heart, takes it well in his stride, chuckling and patting Richie’s back a few times before Richie finally pulls away. “Thanks for coming, man.”

“Happy to b-be here,” Bill says, smiling first at Eddie, then back at Richie. “Your b-band – you’re really good. How l-long have you been playing together?”

Richie shrugs. “Coupla years. It’s nothing serious, just a bit of fun. We’ve all got day jobs.” Eddie blinks at Richie being so uncharacteristically humble. “Now, Bill, let’s get onto the serious shit at hand – I’m gonna need you to tell me every single embarrassing story you have about our cute little Eds right this fuckin’ second.”

Bill laughs. “Well,” he starts, and Eddie is shutting this shit down

right now.

“Nope!” he shouts, glaring daggers at Bill as he continues to laugh. “No embarrassing stories. I’ve never done anything embarrassing in my life. Ever.”

“Don’t l-l-lie to the people, Eddie,” Bill taunts. “What about that time i-in Freshman year of h-high school, when you –“

“Did nothing!” Eddie yells, hoping his eyes can convey to Bill just how much he plans on murdering him the second he gets the opportunity. “When I did nothing so there’s *nothing to tell.*”

They’re all laughing, Richie’s more of a cackle than anything else. Eddie is blushing as he grumbles, only stopping when Richie throws an arm around his shoulders and pulls him in to kiss the crown of his head.

“I will hear that story one day, Billiam,” Richie vows, pointing a determined finger at Bill. “Even if it kills me trying.”

“I’ll kill you if you try,” Eddie mutters, still snaking an arm around Richie’s waist to stop him from pulling away. “How would you like it if I asked Bev for all *your* most humiliating stories?”

Richie scoffs. “Ask away, cutie!” he offers, gesturing towards Beverly. “How long you got? There’s probably too many to be able to tell in one sitting.”

Bev laughs. “That is true, and while I’d *love* to be able to stay all night and embarrass the shit out of ol’ Trashmouth here... Ben and I have gotta go.” She smiles, going round and giving them all a hug, one by one. “Bill, Eddie, hope to see you both again soon! Rich – I’ll catch you tomorrow, I’m gonna stay at Ben’s tonight.”

They all call and wave their goodbyes as Ben and Bev leave, and then they’re left with three.

“I w-was actually thinking o-of going, too, Eddie,” Bill admits, car keys already in hand.

“Aw, man. You going already, Eddie Spaghetti?” Richie says,

sounding extremely disappointed. “I was hoping we’d have a bit more time together tonight.”

Bill raises one eyebrow at Eddie, trying (and failing) to keep the smirk off his face.

“No, I,” Eddie stutters, feeling awkward, in unknown territory here – does asking to stay over at someone’s house for the first time *ever* get any easier? “I was thinking that – that maybe I’d stay? With you? Maybe we could go, um – go back to yours? If that’s okay?”

Richie blinks, clearly caught a little off-guard, and then busts out in a huge, shit-eating grin.

“Of course that’s okay, Spaghetti Head,” he tells Eddie earnestly, and then to Bill, “Bill, my man, it’s been a pleasure meeting you, and after the *incredible* night I’m about to give our dear ol’ Eds, I’m sure this won’t be the last time we see each other.”

Eddie scoffs, elbowing Richie in the ribs, making him let out a puffed *ouch*. Bill just laughs.

“It was good to m-meet you, too,” he agrees, genuine smile on his face as he looks between the two of them. “Have f-fun, guys.”

“Oh, we will,” Richie promises, waving enthusiastically as Bill walks off. Eddie does the same, and once Bill is out of the door and out of their line of sight, he manoeuvres them so that Richie’s back is pressed against the bar with Eddie plastered up his front. “Jeez, Eds – can’t wait until we get back, huh?”

Eddie rolls his eyes, grinning as he pulls Richie down into quick, bruising kiss. “Shut the fuck up and order us a cab, Trashmouth.”

Richie absolutely does not need to be told twice.

Richie's place is a cosy, two bedroom apartment not far from the town centre. There are posters hanging all over the walls – mostly horror movies from the 80s and bands ranging from the 70s to now – and Eddie takes them all in as Richie sits him down on the worn-looking couch before going to grab them a drink from the kitchen.

“Beer?” Richie calls out.

“Water's fine, thanks,” Eddie replies, taking his window of time alone to scope the place out, looking for clues or insights into more of Richie's life. “Whose New Kids On The Block poster is that?”

Eddie hears Richie snort from the kitchen. “Ben's. It's an inside joke between him and Bev.”

“Huh,” Eddie murmurs, sitting up as Richie walks back him and hands him a glass of water. Richie takes the seat beside Eddie, sitting close enough that their thighs are touching. “Thanks for letting me come over tonight.”

“Eds, my boy, thank *you* for gracing me with your presence,” Richie says, winking as he takes a swig of his beer. “Never in my wildest dreams did I think my night would be ending this fuckin' well. Even if all I get tonight is a good ol' fashioned spoon, I'll be the luckiest man in the world.”

“Play your cards right and I might even let you be little spoon,” Eddie teases, grinning.

“You sure do know how to make a gal's heart flutter, cutie.”

Richie picks up a small, rectangular remote from the couch's armrest and presses the play button. The sound of an acoustic guitar begins playing through speakers dotted around the room.

“Is this you?” Eddie asks.

Richie shakes his head. “Nah, man. I'm not *that* narcissistic that I woo my dates with my own fuckin' music playing in the background.”

Eddie chuckles, setting his glass down on the floor after a sip and shuffling a little bit so their whole sides are pressed up against each

other now, feeling bold enough to reach out and twine his left hand with Richie's right, resting them on Richie's leg.

"So there's something I've been wanting to ask," Eddie states.

"Ask away, Eddie Spaghetti," Richie offers, taking another sip from his bottle.

"The name of your band – Bucky Beavers. What's that all about?"

Richie laughs, cheeks turning a little red. "Oh," he mumbles, looking sheepishly at Eddie. "It's, uh. It's a throwback to my high school days. I wasn't a particularly fortunate looking teen. Big ol' glasses and frizzy hair. And I had real buck teeth for a while, so the local bullies used to call me that. Bucky Beaver."

Eddie frowns. "Why – why would you name your band after the nickname you were bullied with as a kid?"

"I don't know, I guess – I guess it's kind of a 'fuck you' to all those assholes, y'know? Like – like, yeah, you called me that, and yeah, it used to hurt me. But now whenever I say it, everyone cheers. They're cheering for Bucky Beaver. I own it now. It can't hurt me anymore."

Eddie is silent for a moment, taking in Richie's soft smile, the way he kind of looks embarrassed.

"Yeah, I get that," Eddie says after a while, squeezing Richie's hand lightly. "Kids at my school used to call me Wheezy." Richie gives him a confused look. "My mom – one of the illnesses she convinced me I had was asthma. I had my inhaler in my hand pretty much twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. It took me years after learning the truth to actually feel like I didn't need it anymore. It was like a security blanket, more than anything else, I think." Eddie pauses to laugh softly. "God, we're both such losers, aren't we?"

"Yeah," Richie concurs happily. "But kids who grow up hot and cool – they're never as fun or as interesting as we are."

Eddie laughs again, feeling so at ease with Richie, more at ease around someone new than he's felt since the first time he met Bill. It spurs him on in his next move – taking Richie's drink out of his hand

and placing it to the side, swinging one leg over both of Richie's thighs so he's straddling him right there on the couch, resting fully into Richie's lap. Richie allows it easily, hands migrating to Eddie's hips as soon as he's settled.

"Fuck the bullies," Eddie whispers, punctuating it with a soft, slow kiss.

"Fuck the bullies," Richie repeats, kissing Eddie again. "But how about we start with each other first, huh?"

Even after almost two months of dating, it still annoys the *fuck* out of Eddie that Richie can sleep through his own damn alarm clock.

"Jesus, *fuck*," Eddie groans, eyes still squeezed shut, after having waited three whole fucking minutes for Richie to actually wake up and turn off his *own damn alarm*. "I fucking hate you, Richard Tozier."

Seeing as how Richie doesn't wake up to a blaring, repetitive noise sounding barely an inch from his ear, he also doesn't wake up to Eddie's resentful mumblings. Eddie knows this is the case – it's been their routine every time Eddie's stayed at Richie's over the past seven weeks – but it still doesn't alleviate the irritation blooming in his chest.

Richie is currently curled around Eddie's back, knees tucked behind knees, mouth pressed warm against Eddie's neck. His arms are wound tight around Eddie's middle, their fingers interlocked, just as they had drifted off the evening before. It's the perfect picture of cosy, romantic happiness.

Eddie ruins it with a swift jab of his elbow into Richie's ribs.

Richie yelps, jerking away in response. Eddie kind of misses the warmth pressed against his back, but it's all about the bigger picture

here – at least now the fucker’s awake.

“Ow!” Richie exclaims after a few seconds, having taken the time to get his bearings and figure out why he was awoken by a sharp pain in his side. “What the fuck, Kaspbrak?”

“Your alarm,” Eddie hisses, burrowing his head deeper into the pillow and pulling the blankets higher around his neck. “It’s been going off for three minutes. One hundred and eighty seconds, Richie. I counted. You know we agreed that was your limit.”

Richie grumbles under his breath, but doesn’t argue. They’d had to agree the rule after Eddie’s fifth sleepover, that also being the fifth time Eddie was woken up and greatly annoyed by a consistently ignored alarm clock: Richie is allowed three minutes to wake up to his own alarm, and if he doesn’t, it’s an elbow to his ribs to help him along with the process.

The alarm is now, gloriously, muted, the room returning to its previous silence, broken only by the occasional sound of rustling sheets and moving limbs as Richie picks his glasses up from the nightstand to put them on and re-attaches himself to Eddie’s back. Eddie leans into Richie’s touch instantly, lacing their fingers back together and bringing them up to his mouth so he can press soft kisses to Richie’s knuckles.

“C’mon, Eds,” Richie placates, pressing soft kisses to the back of Eddie’s neck. “You know I only set it so early so we can have more time together in the mornings.”

“It’s not the fact that it’s early,” Eddie says, argument at the ready – they have this conversation pretty much every morning. “It’s the fact that you sleep through it. It just pisses me off. I don’t understand how you can do it and it irritates me to an honestly irrational level.”

Richie chuckles, the breath of it warm against Eddie’s skin. “You don’t fuckin’ say, Eds.”

Eddie huffs. “Your breath fucking stinks, Tozier.”

“Oh, yeah?” Richie goads, pulling Eddie so that he’s on his back.

Eddie goes with it easily, tangling his hands into Richie's bed-hair when Richie looms over him, elbow resting just above Eddie's shoulder as he rests the side of his head against his palm. "So you don't want a good mornin' kiss from me?"

Eddie shakes his head, biting down a smile. "Hard pass, thanks."

Richie grins, moving his head out of the palm of his hand and beginning to lean down into Eddie's personal space. He cups Eddie's chin with a thumb and an index finger, just a barely there touch to get Eddie to tilt his head, which Eddie does willingly. Richie is still smiling as he leans ever closer, barely a centimetre away, and Eddie would notice the wicked edge to that smile if his eyes hadn't already fluttered closed.

A sudden whoosh of air accompanies Richie clambering off the bed with a quick, jerky movement.

"Guess I better go brush my teeth then!" Richie declares, walking towards his attached bathroom as Eddie glares at his back. "Need me that good morning Spaghetti lovin', don't I, Eds?"

He glances back at Eddie, and Eddie responds by giving him the finger.

"There's no fucking way you're getting it now."

"You say that every morning," Richie reminds him, nodding sagely as he leans against the bathroom doorjamb. "But I've not left this apartment without a thorough smoochin' from my Eds this week, have I?"

Eddie scoffs, but doesn't bother to dispute what he knows to be the truth.

"There's a first time for everything, dickwad," Eddie warns, but Richie doesn't take him at all seriously if his loud laugh is anything to go by. It's a fair assumption on Richie's part; Eddie has absolutely no plans on letting Richie leave this apartment without a heated make-out session first. But still – best to keep up appearances. "Now go brush your fucking teeth; it smells like you ate a week-old dead

animal for fuck's sake."

Richie laughs again, loud and bright, and then disappears further into the bathroom. The sound of a faucet running and an electric toothbrush whirring follows shortly after, and Eddie huddles himself further under the blankets, searching for the warmth that he's missing now that Richie's gone.

This scene playing out; it's not an uncommon one nowadays. Eddie stays over at Richie's at least two or three nights a week, and Richie at Eddie's the same amount. Eddie is loath to admit, but they've kind of become one of those disgusting couples who are together every possible second of every day, and texting incessantly whenever it's not so possible.

What Eddie isn't loath to admit is that they are exactly that – a couple.

Their first night together, after the first of many of Richie's gigs that Eddie has attended, was as incredible as Richie had bragged to Bill it would be – but Eddie will be damned before he'd admit that out loud to Richie. The evening had been filled with laughter, giggles and guffaws alike, alternating between loud and brash and soft and intimate. It had been filled with kissing and wanting, and they'd stayed awake long past Eddie's usual bedtime, learning as much about each other as they could, their conversation only paused every now and then so they could kiss, soft and languid, no rush in it at all.

Eddie still blushes at the memory of Richie offering him a spare toothbrush, to which Eddie had casually replied, "Oh, thanks, but I brought one with me."

Richie still hasn't let him forget about what a "prepared li'l hoe" he had been – nor how much Richie had loved it.

The morning after, Richie hadn't been at all like the smooth, subtle player he tries to make himself out to be. He'd woken Eddie up with a wet, smacking kiss to his cheek, and proceeded to grin inanely down at him until Eddie stopped grumbling and opened his eyes properly.

“So, Eds,” Richie had drawled, peppering kisses all over Eddie’s face in between words. “Are you my fuckin’ boyfriend now, or what?”

Eddie had smiled so wide, it hurt his cheeks. “I don’t know, Rich. Do you want me to be your fuckin’ boyfriend now?”

“Cutie, I have wanted you to be my boyfriend since the very first second I saw your picture. Ain’t nobody else in the world that could hold a candle to my adorable, irritable Eds. ‘Tis why I deleted Tinder the same day you gave me your phone number. So, yes – I absolutely want you to be my fucking boyfriend. And I want to be your incredibly hot, envy-of-all-your-friends boyfriend, too.”

“You’re such an idiot,” Eddie had said, so fond as he carded his fingers through Richie’s hair. “But I guess you’re my idiot now, huh?”

Richie’s responding kiss was far too intense for the early hour of the morning it was taking place in, but Eddie returned it with just as much vigour, regardless.

That morning was almost two months ago, and Eddie’s feelings have only grown since then.

They grow every time Richie kisses him on impulse, a quick kiss hello or a long, leisurely make out session goodbye. They grow every time Richie responds to Eddie’s frequent agitation with a wide smile and outstretched arms, inviting Eddie in for a hug to calm him down. They grow every time Richie confesses to Eddie something about his life growing up, about how Beverly saved him from a life of neglect and reminded him that people *can* be good, and that he himself was worthy of being loved.

With each passing day, Eddie learns more and more about what being Richie Tozier’s boyfriend entails. With each passing day, Eddie finds himself more and more unable to even consider the idea of losing what they have together.

“Yo, Spaghetti Head,” Richie’s voice calls out, breaking Eddie out of his reverie with a blink. “Everything okay over there? Your eyes were so glazed over, I thought I was gonna have to call NASA to get you back down to Earth with us.”

Richie stands in the doorway to the bathroom, shirtless and wearing only a pair of boxers, patterned with large, tacky love-hearts. He's got his toothbrush stilled in his mouth, toothpaste dribbling down his chin, a splatter of it on his chest, fucking *somehow*. His hair is still a mess, likely will be even after he's gone about tackling it with a brush after his shower, and he's blinking owlishly behind his coke-bottle glasses, genuine concern evident under the teasing.

I'm fine, Eddie thinks. *I'm fine and I'm definitely in love with you, you fucking weirdo.*

And that – that is not a thought Eddie has encountered before.

“Oh, um. I'm fine,” Eddie says aloud, spluttering a little as his brain starts going a little crazy on him with panic. Richie's brows furrow as he continues to stare at Eddie unbelievably, so Eddie forces his lips into a smile. “Honest. Just tired, is all. I could do without your fucking alarm pissing me off first thing every morning.”

“But Eds, pissing you off is, like, my number one hobby,” Richie mumbles around his now moving again toothbrush. “You can't take away from me. I'll *die*.”

He grins cheekily and disappears back into the bathroom. Eddie hears him spitting and knows he's got approximately thirty seconds to freak the fuck out about his sudden realisation before Richie will be returning to commence their usual morning make out session.

What the fuck? he thinks. *Where the fuck did that come from? Am I – am I really in love with him? When the fuck did it turn from 'I like Richie a lot we're having lots of fun he makes me laugh and I can see a future there' to 'I am in love with this moron and I want him to be making me laugh for the rest of our lives, so maybe that future is now'?*

Eddie thinks he might know the answer to at least one of those questions: yes, he most certainly is in love with Richie fucking Tozier.

Will he tell the guy? Absolutely fucking not.

Richie hasn't said it, nor even hinted at it. Richie must think that they're not there yet, or Richie himself must at least not be there yet,

and Eddie doesn't want to have to be the one there first: it might freak Richie out, might make him re-evaluate the whole thing they've got going as way too serious for only two months of dating. Eddie can't imagine a world where he doesn't wake up to Richie's smile, and his jokes, and even his disgusting fucking morning breath – and if there's a chance admitting what he's just realised might mean he loses that, well, he's most definitely going to keep it to himself.

Thirty seconds are up as Richie re-enters the room and launches himself onto the bed, immediately proceeding to begin tickling Eddie in all the places he *knows* Eddie is sensitive.

"Stop!" Eddie insists, struggling to breathe as Richie tickles him relentlessly. "I – I said *stop*, asshole! I'm gonna fu-fucking kill you!"

"You'd never kill me," Richie says confidently, but he does stop his fingers movements against Eddie's sides in favour of wrapping them around Eddie's body and pulling them flush together, face to face. "You love my dick too much to deprive yourself of it."

I love you too much, Eddie thinks before he can stop himself, having to bite his tongue to stop from spilling it out loud.

"There's other dick in the sea, Richard," Eddie replies instead, winding his arms around Richie's neck.

"Quit ya lyin', Nurse K," Richie sighs, trailing hot, sticky kisses against Eddie's jaw. "And just let me mack on you before I go to work, alright?"

Eddie does allow it, and his anxiety fades with each press of Richie's lips to his.

It takes thirty minutes and ten additional kisses goodbye to get Richie out of his door that morning. Every time he seems like he's going to leave, on two occasions even getting as far as the top of the stairs, he

rushes back and wraps Eddie up in his arms, kissing him fervently while they both giggle. When Bev catches them she fake retches, and it does mean that Richie's going to be at least ten minutes late into work, but Eddie can't help but think it's worth it.

"Cuppa coffee, lover boy?" Bev calls out to him from the kitchen once Richie has *finally* decided he can't earn a living kissing the crap out of Eddie.

"Yeah, please, thanks," Eddie replies, sitting himself down on the couch in the living room. He's familiar with Richie's place at this point, just as home here as he is at his and Bill's place. He crosses his legs and grabs the blanket from the floor to drape over his, currently still in pyjamas, self. "Do you mind me staying for a little bit longer?"

"Eddie, honey, you can stay as long as you like," Bev says, walking into the living room with a steaming mug in each hand. Eddie accepts the one she proffers to him with a smile, and she takes a seat beside him. "When have I ever kicked you out?"

"Literally last week. You kicked Richie and me out so you could end your date night with Ben as – how did you put it? As *loudly as we want to*."

Bev snorts. "Point," she concedes without shame. "But at least we get you out before we're noisy. I wish I could say the same of *some people*."

There's no heat behind her words, and she cackles as Eddie flushes red to the tips of his ears.

"Shut up, Bev," he mumbles, ducking his head when she ruffles his hair, careful not to spill either of their coffees. "How many times do we have to apologise for that?"

"Well, firstly – Richie's never apologised for it and you fuckin' know it. And secondly, you know I'm only teasing you. I love having you here."

Eddie smiles genuinely at her, and she returns it in kind.

"I love being here, too," he tells her, taking a sip of his cooling coffee.

“Even more so when Richie’s not around, that annoying pain in the ass.”

She gives him a pointed look. “You’re fooling no-one, Kaspbrak – least of all me.”

Eddie laughs. “Can’t have him knowing how I *really* feel, Beverly,” he whispers conspiringly, but as she laughs, he is reminded of how true that statement rings now – how he truly cannot let Richie know that he’s in love with him until Richie says it first. He schools the worry out of his expression before Bev can finish laughing, lest she notice and quiz him – the woman’s damn good at getting information out of just about anybody. “So – what are your plans for the day?”

“Nothing for a few hours.” She shrugs, downing half her cup in one gulp. “I’m meeting Ben for lunch later, but nothing before that. You working today?”

“No,” he confirms, shaking his head. “Day off. I was actually planning on just spending the day here, if that’s okay? I was going to hang around until Richie comes back from work so we could have dinner together. I mean, if that’s okay with you? Rich said it’s fine but I want to check with you as well, obviously. It’s your place, too.”

“Eddie, honestly. You don’t have to ask – of course it’s fine. I’m not lying when I say I love having you here.” She smirks, knocking her knee into Eddie’s. “And I know Richie loves it, too. Honestly, you two – you remind me so much of Ben and me in the early days. Can’t keep your hands off each other. I mean, Ben and I are still like that, but the early days were *intense*. I see so much of that in you two.”

Eddie blushes, eyes on the dwindling amount of coffee left in his mug. He finishes it off with a quick swig and then places it on the coffee table in front of them, turning to look at Bev when he’s done. She’s got her head tilted at him and a soft smile on her face.

“How long have you and Ben been together?” he asks, biting his lip.

“Three years,” she answers proudly, looking somewhat wistful. “Three absolutely incredible years. He’s been so amazing for me. I truly never thought I’d date again after Tom, but Ben – he was there

for me in exactly the way I needed him to be. He was patient and kind and so, so loving. I count myself lucky every single day of my life that I found him.”

“Who’s Tom? I mean – if you don’t mind me asking.”

She blinks at him, like she hadn’t realised she’d said that out loud.

“Oh,” she breathes, chuckling a little nervously. “He – he’s my ex.”

“Did,” Eddie starts, worrying his lip as he frets about whether he’s pushing his boundaries. “Did it end badly between you two?”

“It started *and* ended badly,” she admits, still laughing that nervous laugh. “And everything in the middle was fucking awful, too. He was – he wasn’t a nice guy.”

“Yeah,” Eddie says, almost a whisper. “I know the type.”

She snorts. “I bet my shitty ex can top your shitty ex, Kaspbrak.” Eddie doesn’t reply to that, instead simply lifting both eyebrows in a silent *go on – if you want to*. She fiddles anxiously with the handle on her coffee mug for a few seconds before placing it next to Eddie’s on the coffee table, following it by turning to look at Eddie directly, a determined look on her face. “I – I don’t know if Richie’s said anything to you. I mean, he probably hasn’t because I know Richie isn’t the type to spill other people’s secrets. Not that – not that it’s a secret, I guess. But I kinda prefer not to talk about it.”

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to,” Eddie offers quickly, reaching out to cover her hand with his reassuringly. “Richie’s not said anything to me about your past. And you don’t have to either.”

She smiles and squeezes his hand. “Nah, it’s – it’s fine. I trust you, Eddie. My ex – Tom – he was an asshole. An abusive asshole. I left home at seventeen, and my dad – he used to beat me, and... and other stuff I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to say out loud. And I met Tom four months later, and he was older, much, *much* older. He doted on me and told me how mature I was for my age, how I wasn’t like the other girls, how I was special. We moved in together after a month. But – but it didn’t last for long. Soon enough, he started

hitting me. He called me insolent because I didn't give up smoking when he demanded it. He called me a slut whenever I spoke to another guy. He even tried to cut me off from Richie. I had to lie and say I had work whenever I went round to see him." She pauses and Eddie watches her with wide eyes. "We were together for over a year. I only found the courage to end it when he caught me going to Richie's instead of to work, and he beat me half to death, screaming at me the whole time that it was my fault he was doing this, if only I could be good, then he wouldn't have to lay hands on me. The day after, I told Richie. He helped me move all of my stuff out of Tom's place and into his. And before you try – I don't want pity. Honestly, I'll be pissed if you try throwing any pity my way, Kaspbrak."

The nerves are clear on her as she tells the story, clear in her shaking hands and voice. But Eddie thinks she's the bravest person he's ever encountered. It spurs him on.

"At least you found the courage to tell someone," he says quietly, holding her gaze. "I'd still be with – with Darren, I think, if Bill hadn't noticed the bruises."

Bev inhales sharply. "You," she starts, trailing off after – but Eddie knows what she's trying to say.

"Yeah," he answers her unasked question. "Me too. We were together for two years. He was my first boyfriend. My only boyfriend, before Richie. He made me think he loved me so much. He made me think he was cutting me off from all my friends for my own good – that he was the only person I'd ever need in my life. He'd get so angry if I tried to talk to anyone else, checking my phone to be sure. One time he found a text from Bill on there, asking me to a party at his college. He pushed me into a wall that night and knocked me out cold." Eddie lets out a humourless laugh. "He was crying when I woke up. Apologised and said it'd never happen again. But it – it always does, doesn't it?"

"It does," Bev whispers, still looking at Eddie in shock. "Does – does Richie know?"

Eddie shakes his head vigorously. "No, and I – I don't want him to. You were so brave, Bev. You got yourself out. I was – I *am* weak. I let

him walk all over me and I honestly don't think I'd ever have left if Bill hadn't found out. I don't want Richie knowing that about me. It'd – it'd change things."

"You're not weak, Eddie," Bev assures, pulling him into a hug, murmuring the rest of her sentiments into his ear. "You're strong. You got out. Regardless of who helped – *you* got out. And – and maybe it would change things. But I know Richie, and I know it wouldn't change things for the worse. He wouldn't treat you any differently. He thinks the world of you now, and he'd still think the world of you if he knew."

She pulls away from him, hands on his shoulders as she looks at him imploringly.

"I just. I don't want him to know, Bev," Eddie says, voice strained, tears stinging his eyes. "Please – please promise me you won't tell him?"

"I won't tell him," she swears, eyes misted like she's on the verge of crying, just like Eddie is. "But I really think you should, honey."

"Maybe," Eddie lies, knowing full well he could go his whole life never admitting to – to the man he *loves* what a coward he was, what a pushover he was. He quickly wipes away a single tear that falls down his cheek, offering Bev a shaky smile which she returns. "How about we quit talking about our depressing shared trauma and watch a movie instead, or something?"

Bev laughs. "Sounds good to me. You pick – I've just gotta go sort something real quick."

She stands up and walks into her bedroom as Eddie turns the TV on and starts browsing Netflix. He feels almost cleansed, having told his story. He wonders if it feels the same for Bev. He wonders if it'd feel the same to tell Richie – and quickly shuts that thought down as absolutely never going to fucking happen. He hears Bev talking in hushed tones in the bedroom, catching fragments here and there.

Ben – can't make it today – I can't explain, but just trust me – thank you – I love you.

She returns to the room as Eddie settles on a shitty 80s rom-com, taking her seat back, but closer to Eddie this time, so they're almost cuddled up to one another.

"Everything okay?" Eddie asks.

"Yeah, all good. Ben just called to say he can't make lunch anymore, so we're gonna do dinner instead." She ruffles Eddie's hair affectionately. "So you're stuck with me for a little longer than we first thought. That cool?"

Eddie knows she's lying, but the company will be good, he thinks. So he doesn't call her out on it.

"Yeah, sure, Bev," he says, manoeuvring them so they really are cuddling. "And – and thank you."

"Nothing to thank me for." She presses a soft kiss to his cheek. "Now let's watch Molly Ringwald get the guy."

Bev leaves an hour before Richie is due home, leaving Eddie with a hug and another press of her lips to his cheek. Eddie is so thankful for her company for the afternoon, thankful to her for keeping him out of his thoughts. He hopes that he was able to offer that to her, too, even if just a little bit. He tries to tell her this in the tightness of his arms around her when they hug.

After she's gone, Eddie knows he has some time to kill. He meanders around in the kitchen, prepping ingredients so he can make dinner for Richie. He had decided on making Richie's favourite – steak and fries – last night before he came over, and had picked up the ingredients en route and discretely stored them in Richie and Bev's permanently empty fridge. Time passes quickly as he starts to cook, and soon enough, it's the time Richie's due home, announcing his presence with a slammed front door.

“Rich?” Eddie calls out, plating the food and placing it onto the already laid table. “That you?”

“Yeah,” Richie says bluntly.

Eddie frowns, not used to hearing Richie’s tone sounding like that – like he’s agitated. He waits where he is in the kitchen, and Richie enters after a few minutes. His face looks different; solemn and irritated, his mouth a hard, tight line and his eyes not looking at Eddie.

“Everything okay?” Eddie asks, feeling uneasy. “You seem kinda... tense?”

“I’m fine,” Richie snaps.

Eddie’s never had Richie speak to him like that before. It makes him flinch, and he tries to hide it.

“Are you sure? You don’t – you don’t seem your usual self.” Richie doesn’t answer, just moves around Eddie so he can reach the fridge, pulling out a bottle of beer and un-capping it immediately, pulling from it like he hasn’t had anything to drink in years. “Rich, are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fucking *fine*, Eddie!” Richie yells, slamming the fridge door shut. “Quit fucking asking, would ya? *Jesus*.”

Eddie goes against his instinct and ignores Richie’s words, walking slowly toward him instead. He knows that Richie isn’t like *this*, isn’t like *Darren*, so he’s got nothing to be scared of – right?

“Richie, please, you can – you can talk to me,” Eddie pleads. He wraps his fingers around Richie’s forearm and is immediately shrugged off by Richie’s jerky movement. This time, Eddie isn’t able to hide his flinch. “I – I made dinner. We can sit down and eat and you can – you can talk to me.”

“Jesus, Eddie, are you fucking *deaf*?” Richie barks, moving away from Eddie again. “I don’t *want* to fucking talk! And I’m not fucking hungry.”

Eddie goes quiet for a moment, watching as Richie takes a seat at the table, in front of his favourite meal that Eddie has cooked for him. He watches as Richie pushes it away from himself so he can slam his nearly empty beer bottle in its place.

“Rich –“

Eddie is cut off by the loud sound of a plate smashing against the wall opposite him.

“Jesus fucking *Christ*, Eddie! Would you quit your fucking yappin’ for two fucking seconds? I don’t *want* to talk, I don’t *want* to eat! I just *want* you to leave me the *fuck* alone, alright?”

Richie stands up straight after his outburst, moving back over to the fridge, taking out and beginning to drain another bottle of beer. Eddie’s eyes are fixated on the smashed pieces of ceramic littering the kitchen floor, the uneaten food around it. He can barely find the breath in his chest and his hands are shaking at his sides.

“Okay,” he whispers, feeling a familiar fear course through his veins. “I’m leaving.”

Richie’s eyes track him as he goes, following him into the living room, waiting there as Eddie goes into Richie’s bedroom to collect his things. When Eddie is done and has returned to the same room as Richie, Richie’s eyes have lost their anger and his beer bottle sits half-drunk on the coffee table.

“Eddie,” he says. Eddie ignores him and grabs his jacket. “Eddie, listen, I’m sorry.”

“I don’t want to hear it,” Eddie replies, voice sounding far stronger than he feels. “I’m going and I – I don’t want to hear anything from you.”

Richie rolls his eyes, starting to walk over to Eddie. Eddie responds by quickly moving to the front door.

“Eds.” Richie huffs a laugh, eyes wide and disbelieving. “C’mon. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have yelled and ruined dinner. But – but you don’t have to *go*.”

"I'm leaving," Eddie says again, like maybe if he says it enough, it'll feel easier to do. "I can't – I can't go through this again."

"What are you talking about?" Richie is beginning to sound desperate; worried. "Go through what?" Eddie shakes his head, eyes squeezed shut as he reaches blindly for the door handle and swings it open. "Eds, baby – please. Please, you don't have to go, just stay, we can fucking talk about it if you want to fucking talk about!"

Eddie leaves and ignores Richie's frantic pleas on his way out.

Bill is at Richie's barely ten minutes later to pick Eddie up, responding quickly to the message Eddie had sent him asking him if he was free to do so. Eddie climbs into the car without a word and Bill knows him well enough not to ask – he knows Eddie will talk when he's ready. The whole journey back to their apartment is silent, save for the faint murmur of the radio. A song comes on that Richie had played once at one of his gigs, dedicating it to *my Eds in the crowd*.

It's *Here Comes Your Man* by Pixies, and Eddie turns it off abruptly upon the opening chords.

The apartment is empty when they arrive home and Eddie collapses onto the couch, Bill sitting nervously beside him. A few minutes pass of deafening silence before Eddie breaks, crumbling into Bill's arms and letting himself cry.

"Eddie," Bill says desperately, arms cradling Eddie's head as he wracks sobs into Bill's chest. "Wh-what happened?"

Through his tears, Eddie goes over the whole story – telling Bev about Darren, waiting for Richie and making dinner for the two of them, Richie coming home in such an awful mood that he threw a plate against the wall, Eddie leaving immediately after. Bill holds him through all of it, stroking his hair.

“Am I – am I over-reacting, Bill?” Eddie asks once the story has been laid out bare.

“No,” Bill assures firmly, anger lacing his tone. “You’re n-not over-reacting, Eddie. He sh-shouldn’t have shouted. O-or thrown shit. If h-he was angry, that’s n-not a fucking okay way to h-handle it.”

“But he didn’t throw it *at* me. And – and he asked me to stop asking, and I didn’t, so – so was this my fault?”

Bill’s body tenses and he sits Eddie up so that they’re looking at each other. Eddie knows his eyes must be red-rimmed, there’s likely snot pooled around his nostrils, his face a painful looking red. He wants to hide his face from Bill, the world, *Richie*, and never re-surface again.

“Don’t y-you dare say that, Eddie. Don’t you dare m-make excuses for him. *None* of this i-is your f-f-fault. You did the r-right thing by leaving.”

Eddie chews painfully at his already bitten up bottom lip. His phone buzzes in his jacket pocket and he already knows who it’s going to be.

“Can you,” Eddie starts, taking his phone out without looking at it and handing it over to Bill. “Can you read it and – and tell me what it says? Please?” Bill nods, taking the phone gingerly from Eddie’s hands. Eddie watches as his eyes scan the screen, the angry look still sitting across his features. “What does it say? Is it *Richie*?”

“He s-says he’s sorry,” Bill reads aloud. “He’s sorry and he w-wants to come over so you can t-talk.”

Eddie shakes his head quickly. “I don’t want him to come over,” he states instantly. “Please, Bill, I – I don’t want to see him. Not – not tonight.”

“Not ever,” Bill mumbles under his breath, almost too quiet for Eddie to hear, then louder, “Do you w-want me to text him back?”

As Eddie opens his mouth to reply, the phone starts to buzz rhythmically in Bill’s hand.

“Is it Richie?” Bill nods in confirmation. “Can – can you answer, please?”

Bill lets the phone ring a few more times before swiping to answer. Eddie can faintly hear the voice, Richie’s voice, frantic on the other end of the call.

“Eddie,” he hears Richie say, almost breathless; panicked. “Eddie, baby, please, I’m so sorry, I fucked up, I know I fucking fucked up and I’m so, so sorry. Please let me come over, please let me see you, I want to talk to you, I want to tell you why –“

“He doesn’t want to s-s-see you,” Bill declares, cutting Richie off.

“Bill,” Richie breathes. “Please, I’m sorry, Eddie needs to know how sorry I am, please just let me talk to him, I’m begging you.”

“It doesn’t m-matter how sorry you are. You can’t a-a-act like that.”

“I know, Bill, I fucking know, I fucked up so badly, I –“

“Don’t c-call again.” There’s no room for argument in Bill’s tone and he hangs up before Richie can reply. Eddie watches him, feeling his chest tighten and his eyes start stinging. Bill wraps him up in yet another hug and Eddie lets the tears fall once again. “I’m sorry, Eddie. I’m s-sorry this has happened and I’m sorry th-that I forced you to get that st-st-st – *fuck*. That idiotic fucking app in the f-first place.”

“I realised today that I love him, Bill,” Eddie admits, body aching. “I woke up in his bed this morning and watched him brush his teeth and realised that I was in love with him. He’d always been everything that – that Darren wasn’t. I didn’t – I hadn’t seen this side of him, before tonight.”

Eddie feels a kiss pressed to the top of his head. “I’m sorry, Eddie,” Bill repeats, voice soft, barely above a whisper. “D-do you want to sleep in my bed tonight?”

Growing up, he and Bill had always had a tradition: if it got to bedtime and either one of them was upset or crying, they would always sleep in the same bed, limbs tangled. The non-upset person

always had to stay awake until the upset one fell asleep first, so they could talk if they wanted to. It had always made them both feel so safe to be in each other's arms, to be so close to their very best friend in the world.

For the first few months after Eddie's break-up with Darren, they'd fallen asleep that way every single night.

"Yes, please," Eddie says quietly. "I – I don't know what I'd do without you, Bill."

"You'll n-never have to know."

Bill stands them both up and moves them into his bedroom, leaving Eddie there for a few seconds so he can go and get Eddie's pyjamas. He returns soon enough and they clamber into bed together once they're both changed. They lie facing each other, heads on separate pillows, ankles hooked around one another.

"Can I – can I see my phone? Please?" Eddie requests.

Bill looks hesitant, but hands it over after a moment. Eddie takes a deep breath before opening it up, finding two messages – one older, read already by Bill, and one newer, currently unread.

Eddie fuck I'm so sorry please can I come over so we can talk?

I'm so sorry Eddie. I fucked up. I'm a complete fucking asshole. I'm an asshole and I don't deserve an amazing person like you. I let my temper and my past fuck up my present and I just hope so badly that you'll give me a chance to see you and talk to you. However far in the future that may be. I'd wait until the end of the world for you Eddie. I'm sorry.

Bill holds Eddie as he cries yet again, whispering soothing words into his ears. Dawn is breaking by the time Eddie manages to fall asleep, and Bill stays up with him the whole time.

Bill offers to call in sick to work the morning after, but Eddie just shakes his head.

“It’s fine, Big Bill,” he asserts, rolling his eyes with a forced smile when Bill doesn’t look convinced. “Honestly, it’s fine. Go to work. I’ll be fine. I’ll just – I’ll just watch TV and eat ice cream and do other normal heartbreak-y stuff.”

It still takes another few goes of persuading, but eventually Bill leaves for work.

Eddie stays in bed once Bill is gone. He wraps himself up in the blankets and stares at his still phone on the bedside table, feeling empty and aching all at once. He is only aware of time passing because of the digital alarm clock that sits beside his phone, and he notes with each hour that he should be feeling hungry, but it seems his body has decided it actually can’t feel anything but sadness today.

When the clock reads 13:11, there’s a knock at the door. In the same heartbeat, Eddie both panics and hopes that it’s Richie. He untangles himself from the mound of duvets covering him, walking hesitantly towards the front door.

“Who is it?” Eddie asks when he’s about a foot away.

“It’s Bev,” comes the answer. “Can I come in, Eddie? Please? Richie’s not with me.”

Eddie opens the door.

“Hi,” he greets, hating the way he can already see so much pity in Bev’s eyes. He knows he must look an absolute mess, still dressed in his night clothes in the middle of the day, face blotchy and red from on and off bouts of crying. He ducks his head so he won’t have to see the look on her face anymore. “Did – did Richie send you?”

“No. He doesn’t know I’m here,” she admits, still standing tentatively in the hallway. “He said Bill told him to leave you alone, so he’s doing exactly that.”

Eddie nods, eyes still fixed on the floor. “Yeah, I don’t want to see him,” Eddie says, not even sure himself whether that’s the truth or a lie. “Do you – do you want to come in?”

“Yeah, sure. Thank you.”

She walks inside and closes the door behind her. Eddie doesn’t have to look up at her face to know the same expression still sits there; sorrowful and worried.

“Can I get you a drink, or something?” he offers.

“Sure,” Bev agrees, following when Eddie makes his way into the kitchen. She takes a seat at the kitchen table while Eddie starts the coffee maker up, not needing to ask to know how she’ll take it. After a few minutes of quiet, the whirring of the coffee machine the loudest noise in the room, she speaks again. “Thanks for letting me come in, Eddie.”

“You don’t have to thank me,” Eddie affirms, back turned to her. “We’re friends, even if...”

He trails off, finding his throat closing up at the prospect of trying to finish that sentence. He curls his fingers around the edge of the kitchen counter, gripping so tightly like it’s the only thing holding him up. He jumps when he feels Bev’s hand land on his shoulder, gentle as she may be in her touch.

“Eddie,” she whispers, but Eddie can’t turn around, can’t look at her. “Richie, he – he told me what happened.”

Eddie squeezes his eyes shut, almost painfully. “I guessed as much. How – how is he?”

“Fucking inconsolable,” she confesses. “He looks even worse than you.”

“I somehow doubt that,” Eddie says, laughing softly, Bev joining him in it. Her hand is still on his shoulder as Eddie finally turns around to face her. “You didn’t – didn’t tell him, right? About – about Darren?”

“No, Eddie, of course not,” she promises, moving her hand from his

shoulder to his cheek. "I swore to you that I wouldn't tell him, and I'll stick by that. But I still think that *you* need to tell him. He knows what he did was awful. He's disgusted with himself for getting as angry as he did and he's terrified it'll mean he loses you. And he doesn't even understand yet why what he did freaked you out so much. When – if – you tell him... as shitty as he's feeling right now, it won't even begin to compare."

"I just. I don't understand, Bev. He was so angry. I've never seen him like that before. He shouted at me and he threw – he threw a *plate* at the wall because I made him that angry. I didn't – I didn't think he was like that."

"He's not," Bev says quickly, using her thumb to brush away a tear that has rolled its way down Eddie's cheek. "He's not like that. And it wasn't *you* who made him angry, but he took it out on you and that was wrong of him. But – but he's honestly not like that. Do you... do you really think that I'd be friends with him, *living* with him, if that was the kind of person he truly was?"

"I did think that about that," Eddie reveals quietly. "But I just – he scared me, Bev. He scared me so much."

"I know, sweetie. And he's so sorry, and I'm not here to make excuses for him, but... but I just think the two of you need to talk." She regards him sadly, leaning forward to press a kiss to his forehead. "Please talk to him, Eddie. You two – you're perfect for each other. I've never seen him happier in his life than I have these past few months."

She pulls away and Eddie lifts his hand, tangling it with hers as it rests on his cheek.

"Okay," he agrees eventually, and she smiles at him, looking so relieved.

"Thank you," she says, genuine gratitude clear in her tone. She presses another quick kiss to his forehead. "I'm really sorry, but I kinda have to go – I'm meant to be in work in ten minutes."

Eddie huffs a laugh. "It's fine. Sorry for being such a shitty host – you

never got your coffee.”

“Don’t worry about it,” she laughs. “Maybe you can make it up to me another time.”

He can hear the hope in her voice, and he knows what she’s hoping for. She’s hoping that Eddie will stay true to his promise, that he and Richie will talk, really, properly *talk* to each other and sort everything out. She’s hoping that this won’t be the last time she sees Eddie.

Eddie wishes he could answer her with certainty, but instead he replies, “Yeah, Bev. Maybe.”

He leads her to the door and they hug goodbye. Eddie pretends not to notice how tightly she holds him, like she’s worried it might be the last time. Eddie can’t pretend that he’s not holding her back in the same way for the same reason.

After she’s gone, he sinks down against the closed door and tilts his head back to rest against it for a full five minutes. His brain is hyper-focused on one thing and one thing alone: *Richie*. He pulls his phone out and taps out a new message.

You can come over

The reply comes within seconds.

Thank you. I’ll be there in 20

Eddie’s chest feels a little looser for the first time in nearly twenty-four hours.

There’s a hurried banging on the door after only ten minutes. Eddie is still sitting leaning against it, so he feels the force of it reverberate through his body. He stands up quickly, mouth already forming the

words to chastise Richie for breaking the speed limit so badly on his way over as he swings the door open, but they never find their way out when he sees what's on the other side.

"Hey, Eddie."

The person standing in his hallways looks different to how Eddie remembers him. His hair is a bit shorter, there's a small scar above his eyebrow that hadn't been there before, and his nose is a little more crooked.

Eddie wonders if that last change is from when Bill punched him, those few years ago.

"Darren," Eddie breathes, because despite the minor changes, he's still recognisable. Eddie begins to feel nauseas; he can already feel his hands shaking. "Wh-what are you doing here? How do you... how do you know where I live?"

"I called the hospital and charmed my way into getting your address," Darren says with a wink and a grin, casual as anything. "You've got your work listed on your Facebook. You gotta learn to make your settings a little more private, babe." Eddie flinches at the pet name. "Can I come in?"

He doesn't wait for an answer from Eddie before stepping inside and around Eddie, standing in the living room with his chest puffed out like he owns the place. Eddie doesn't know why, but he closes the door and leans against it instead of screaming for someone to help him.

"What are you doing here?" Eddie asks again.

Darren *tsks*. "Not even gonna offer me a drink, a seat?" he mocks. "Eddie, babe. You've changed." He winks again, extending his arms and advancing on Eddie. Eddie is frozen still in shock, in fear, and so he lets himself be enveloped in a hug. "You not gonna hug me back? We haven't seen each other in over two years!"

Tentatively, almost against his own volition, Eddie lifts his arms to return the hug.

Maybe he's changed, Eddie thinks. *Maybe he's here to apologise for what he did to me.*

"Will you," Eddie mutters, stepping away from Darren as soon as he's released from his arms. "Will you tell me why you're here? Please?"

He tacks on the please when he notices the familiar irritation dancing in Darren's eyes.

"Well, since you asked so *nicely*, babe." Darren takes a step towards Eddie again, resting one hand against Eddie's hip, using the other to cup Eddie's jaw. Eddie wants so badly to jerk away from the touch, but he forces himself to stay still and hold Darren's eye, simply because he fears for his safety if he doesn't. "I think it's about time we stopped kidding ourselves."

"What do you mean?" Eddie swallows thickly. "About – about what?"

"About *us*. You're my soulmate," Darren says, his thumb stroking too roughly across Eddie's cheek. Eddie feels like he can't breathe. "I've let you gallivant around for two years, but you're *mine*, Eddie. And it's time for me to re-claim what's mine."

"I'm not," Eddie starts, but Darren cuts him off.

"Bill's been feeding you poison about me," Darren snaps, hand tightening uncomfortably at Eddie's hip. "He's been telling you I'm bad for you. He's a *liar*, Eddie. *He's* the one who's bad for you. I'm the only person who really cares about you. I know that. You know that. It's all the *others* that don't understand."

"You –"

"If you interrupt me one more *fucking* time," Darren yells, his hand at Eddie's jaw moving to his neck, thumb pressed against the Adam's apple there. It's not a hard press, not yet, but it's there, a present threat that shuts Eddie up instantly. "You need me in your life, Eddie. You need someone to control that fucking mouth of yours. Too fucking disrespectful for your own good." He pauses, sneer affecting his features. "How many guys have you been with since me, Eddie? Two years is a long time, and you were always so *desperate* to be

talking to other guys, going to their parties, meeting them for coffees.”

“Darren,” Eddie whispers, gingerly lifting his hand to wrap around the wrist at Eddie’s throat. “Darren, please, let me go.”

Darren’s thumb presses a little bit harder. “Answer the *fucking* question!”

Something inside of Eddie snaps. His hands stop being hesitant, his voice stops being barely above a murmur. He wraps strong hands around Darren’s wrists and yanks them away from him, shoving Darren away after.

“Don’t fucking touch me!” he shouts, shoving Darren again. For a second, Darren looks taken aback, but it quickly morphs into pure, unadulterated rage as he advances on Eddie again. He reaches out to grab him, but Eddie dodges him. “Get out! Get the *fuck* out of my home before I call the fucking cops on you like I should’ve done two years ago! You’re a pathetic, disgusting man and I never want to see you again in my *life*!”

Darren’s mouth twists in anger, opening to shout back as his hands clench into fists. His words cut out as his head snaps in the direction of the door, and blood is pounding so hard in Eddie’s ears that he almost doesn’t realise why, but then he sees it – the turn of a door handle.

“Eds?” comes a voice, and suddenly Eddie understands – he’d forgotten about the text he’d sent. Eddie’s eyes flicker between Darren and the slowly opening door nervously. “I heard shouting so I used the spare key. Is everything okay?”

By his last sentence, Richie has opened the door fully and is taking in the scene before him.

“Who the fuck is this?” Darren shouts, stalking towards Richie.

Richie holds his hands up, placating. “Whoa, man, chill out.” His eyes turn to Eddie, concern clear in his expression and tone of voice. “You okay, Eds?”

"I'm fine," Eddie says, only half a lie now that Richie's here.

"Who the *fuck* is this, Eddie?" Darren hisses, rounding on Richie again.

Whilst Richie towers over Darren height-wise, Darren is more built, with broader shoulders and more muscles shaping his body. Richie's face is scrunched up in confusion, leaning away from Darren's figure with his palms still facing outwards.

"Get out." Eddie's voice is dangerously low. "I mean it, Darren. Get the fuck out and don't ever fucking come back."

Darren grits his teeth and turns his body towards Eddie. Before he can take a step closer, Richie has grabbed him, yanking his arms uncomfortably against his own back in a tight hold. Darren struggles against him, but Richie holds firm.

"Okay buddy, you heard the man," Richie says. "Time to fuckin' go, c'mon."

"Fuck you, Eddie," Darren sneers, face contorting. "You're worthless without me. One day you'll come crawling back – I know you will."

Nearly twenty years of being friends with Bill must be having an effect on Eddie, because he responds to Darren's words with a jab of his fist, managing to break the fucker's nose with a loud *crack* upon impact.

"I wouldn't count on it, asshole."

Eddie ignores the throbbing pain in his knuckles and instead notices that Richie's got this ridiculous, love-struck smile stuck on his face, only shaking himself back into reality when Darren begins struggling in his arms again. He pushes Darren out of the door roughly, laughing a little dazedly when Darren falls to his knees on the hallway floor. Eddie doesn't wait another second before slamming the door behind him.

"Holy shit," Richie breathes as soon as the door's closed. "Holy *shit*. Who the *fuck* was that guy?"

Richie's eyes flicker to the angry red of Eddie's knuckles and he gasps a little, like he hadn't expected the damage. Eddie wonders if Richie's ever hit someone before, and decides based on the way he handled that conflict – hands held up in pacification until forced not to be, and even then holding onto someone simply to *stop* any violence – that he probably hasn't. Richie walks straight into the kitchen and Eddie can hear him rummaging around in the freezer until he finds a bag of frozen something. He returns with it a moment later, holding out a bag of frozen peas.

"Thanks," Eddie mumbles, wincing as he places the coldness against his sore hand.

"No problem." They both stand awkwardly for a silent few seconds, staring at each other intently. Richie breaks it first. "So it kinda looks like we've both got a story to tell, huh?"

Eddie laughs softly. "Yeah, it would seem so." He bites his lip. "Do you want to go first?"

Richie nods slowly and Eddie nods once back, leading them both over to the couch so they can take a seat. It's so unlike any time they've sat together on this couch before. Before, you'd barely be able to differentiate where Eddie's limbs started and Richie's limbs ended, as closely pressed together as they'd always be. Now they're on opposite ends, barely able to look at each other.

The distance between them is palpable in the air and they both feel it.

"I want to start by saying how fucking sorry I am," Richie states, lifting his gaze as he talks to meet Eddie's eyes. "And I know sorry can't change what I did, how I acted, but... but I just need you to know that I am. I'm sorry. I'm a fucking asshole with awful, unhealthy coping mechanisms and I'm so fucking sorry."

He goes quiet after his third apology, still looking directly at Eddie.

"It wasn't okay, Richie," Eddie murmurs. "It's *not* okay. You can't – can't yell at me or throw shit around. If you're angry, you talk to me. You fucking *talk* to me and we sort it out together. You can't act like

that.”

“I know, Eds, *shit*, I fucking know.” Richie’s eyes are red behind his glasses, his lip trembling so hard he has to bite it still. “The way I behaved – I’m fucking ashamed of myself. I know it was wrong. I know I fucked up.”

“Why, Richie?” Eddie implores, watching as Richie lifts his glasses to rub roughly at his eyes, letting his hands fall into his lap afterwards. “What happened that upset you so much? I just wanted to know so I could *help*.”

“Fuck, I know, Eds, I know that now. I just – the way I was raised, and that’s a very fucking loose use of the term... nobody asked for help. We got on with our shit and we dealt with our emotions – sadness, frustration, our *anger* – we dealt with them through drinking. And yelling. And – and throwing shit around to get rid of all the pent up fucking *rage* that built up inside. And – and yesterday, my mom, she – she called me. First fuckin’ time she’s tried to get in contact with me since I left five years ago.” He snorts humourlessly. “She calls me and she doesn’t ask how I am, *where* I am. She asks if I’ve got any money I can send her because they’re trying to re-possess her new TV. I don’t even know how she got my fuckin’ number, but clearly it was possible and she’s just never bothered trying before.”

Eddie longs so much to reach out across the expanse between them and hold Richie’s hand, but he doesn’t.

“That’s fucking awful,” he says instead.

Richie snorts another humourless laugh. “Yeah,” he agrees, frowning afterwards. “But it’s no fucking excuse and I know that. My parents – they’ve always been shitty, and I know they always *will* be shitty. Just because – just because I still wish that they cared about me, even now after everything they’ve done... Taking it out on you was wrong. And it will *never* fucking happen again, Eddie. I really hope you can believe me when I say that.”

And Eddie – Eddie does believe him. He does, even despite the innumerable times Darren had said those very words to him, believe that Richie will learn from this. That he’ll handle his anger better,

handle *himself* better, that Eddie will never bear the brunt of Richie's temper again.

Darren was Darren; a controlling, cruel man who saw Eddie as a possession. Someone he could manipulate like a puppet to his will. Someone he could punish when they disobeyed.

Richie is Richie; adoring, ridiculous, so un-funny sometimes that you just *have* to laugh. A human who makes mistakes, but a human who can and will grow from them.

"I believe you," Eddie declares, watching as Richie's mouth lifts up into a hesitant, hopeful smile. Eddie feels his face matching it instinctively. "I just need you to talk to me, Rich. I need you to let me in and let me help you."

"I will," Richie promises quickly. "I swear to all that is fucking holy that I will. I really thought that I'd lost you, Eds, and... *fuck*. It nearly fucking killed me."

Eddie's lips quirk. "Yeah, I know. Beverly told me. Inconsolable was the word she used, actually."

"You talked to Bev?" Richie asks, looking shocked.

Eddie nods. "Yeah. She came over earlier to plead your case." He bites his lip, eyes flitting down to his lap, hands clasped together there to stop them fidgeting nervously. "Bev, she... she knows something about me. Something I've not told you. But something I'm about to tell you." He pauses, forcing his gaze back up to Richie's face. "It might change how you think of me, Rich."

"Eds, baby, there's nothing you could say or do that would stop me lo—"

Richie stops there, seeming to choke on whatever word was next. Eddie's heart flutters as he fights down any notion that he may have known what word Richie was going to say next. Even if it was – was *that*, there's no point hearing it now.

He won't want to say it after I've told him what a coward I am, Eddie's brain tells him bitterly. He won't want to say it after I've told him what

damaged goods I am.

“There’s nothing in the world that could change how I feel about you,” Richie finishes.

“I wouldn’t speak too soon,” Eddie mumbles.

Richie tilts his head in question, his eyes soft and open. Eddie wishes he couldn’t read the unabashed emotion, the unabashed *adoration*, in them. If not only because it’ll feel so much worse when it disappears after his revelation.

“Is it about that guy?” Richie asks, head inclined slightly towards the front door. “That – that Darren guy?” Eddie nods, eyes already stinging with the threat of tears. Richie moves, *finally*, shuffling closer and wrapping an arm around Eddie’s shoulder, pressing a kiss to the crown of his head. “Eds, baby, you don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to. I mean – I want to know anything, *everything* about you. The good shit and the bad, but... but I only want to know as much as *you* want to tell me.”

“No,” Eddie says, resolute, shaking his head vigorously. “I can’t – I can’t keep *this* from you. Not anymore. As much as I hate it, it’s a part of who I am, and – and I need you to know.”

“Okay,” Richie breathes, kissing Eddie’s temple once, twice more. He pulls back and lifts Eddie’s face with a gentle tilt of his fingertips, pressing the sweetest, softest kiss to Eddie’s lips that Eddie’s ever felt. “I’m listening, baby.”

Eddie doesn’t begin his story straight away. Instead, he presses more kisses to Richie’s face. Soft, sweet ones to mirror Richie’s first, harder, desperate ones as his brain begins to remind him that these might be their last, that Richie might want nothing more to do with Eddie once he knows the truth.

If Eddie were clear of mind, he’d know this was total bullshit. He’d know that not only does Richie *love* him, he hopes, and that love is unconditional, but that Richie was there for Beverly all through her recovery, that Richie didn’t shun her or shame her for staying too long, as Eddie has heard so many others say carelessly around him.

But he's not clear of mind. He can still hear Darren's voice in his head, hear all the things Darren would say to him when they were together. He can hear Darren telling him how no-one else could ever love him, how no-one else could ever put up with him the way Darren did.

He still hates himself for staying as long as he did, and he's so scared that Richie will too.

Eddie is crying when he pulls away from Richie's mouth, soft, silent tears that make his cheeks feel sticky. Richie brushes away each one that falls speechlessly with a gentle swipe of his calloused thumb.

When Eddie starts talking, his voice is shaky and choked, but he doesn't let that stop him. He and Richie remain nose to nose as he speaks and he doesn't dare open his eyes the whole time.

"Darren was my boyfriend. I met him when I was eighteen at a party in college. I'd only ever kissed one guy before him, and he – he latched onto that, I think. He latched onto the fact that he had more experience than me, that I was new to everything about being gay and being in a relationship. He was kind to me when we first got together; patient, loving. He would show me off proudly and tell me how much he loved me and how – how he was so glad he'd found his way to me before anyone else had. But after a few months... he stopped being so nice. He would yell at me for talking back. He would tell me that my insolence was infuriating and that I was lucky he put up with me, because no-one else would. I had no experience for comparison. I didn't know it wasn't normal for the person who says they love to you to scream at you, as well. I just – I thought he was right. I thought it was my fault and I needed to change."

Eddie allows himself a pause, taking a second to steady his harsh breathing. He feels Richie press a feather-light kiss to his forehead.

"He got so far into my head and I really believed he was right. I think he realised this when I started to change, to bend any which way he wanted me to. And that's when – that's when he started to cut me off from people. I think he was scared that I'd tell people how he was acting. That I'd tell someone and they'd tell *me* that, hey, actually, that's not a normal relationship. So he told me I wasn't allowed to go

to any more parties. That I wasn't allowed to go to restaurants, go for coffees, with anyone but him. I lost all of the friends I'd made because I kept having to turn them down, reject their invites to places I so desperately wanted to go. I almost fucking lost Bill. He would go through my phone and see if anyone had texted me. Even if I'd ignored it, I'd hear about it. And at first – at first, he'd just yell. He'd shout and accuse me of cheating on him, and I'd sit there and take it. Then one day, I just – I couldn't sit there and take it. He accused me of cheating on him with Bill, he told me I was never to speak to Bill again, and I – I lost it. I shouted back."

Eddie opens his eyes, finds Richie staring at him earnestly, mouth parted slightly as he takes it all in.

"I shouted back," Eddie whispers, hand curled tightly into Richie's shirt. "And I had a black eye for a week."

Richie doesn't gasp in shock. Eddie knows, really, that Richie knew where this was going; that he knew it was headed here.

"How many times did he..." Richie asks, trailing off, but Eddie knows the question he wants to ask.

"Hurt me?" Eddie finishes, a humourless laugh bubbling out of his mouth. "Well, we were together for two years and the beatings started about three months in, so. I don't think I can count high enough to tell you, to be honest."

Richie's eyes fall closed, his mouth a hard line.

This is the part where he leaves, Eddie thinks.

"You're so fucking brave," Richie says instead, shocking Eddie. "Why the hell did you think this would change how I think – how I *feel* – about you? The only thing it changes is that I wish I knew before, when that fucking *weasel* was still here, so I could've given him a broken jaw to go along with that nose."

"You don't understand," Eddie replies sadly, shaking his head. "I didn't – I wasn't like Bev. I didn't tell anyone. I didn't get myself out. I visited Bill, after almost a year of begging Darren to let me, and he

– he noticed the bruises and made me tell him the truth. I don’t – I don’t know if I’d have ever been able to find the courage to leave if someone hadn’t forced my hand.”

“Eds,” Richie breathes, fingers brushing lightly over Eddie’s cheek. “Telling the truth – *that* was brave. Letting somebody help you – *that* was brave. You’ve got more courage in your fuckin’ pinky finger than I have in my whole, lanky streak of piss body.” Despite himself, despite everything, Eddie laughs. A soft, genuine laugh, that Richie returns in kind before continuing. “Everything that asshole ever told you about yourself was a lie, Eddie. You’re the most incredible person I’ve ever known.”

Eddie’s breath hitches. “Yeah?”

“Fuck yeah,” Richie proclaims, like it’s an undisputable truth. “I love that you’re feisty. I love that you disagree with me on pretty much everything. I love your relationship with Bill and I just – I love *you*, Eddie. I love literally everything about you. I’m so fucking in love with you that sometimes I don’t know how I made it twenty-three years without you.”

Eddie’s breath hitches again, and he’s smiling when he says, “I love you, too, Richie.”

Richie blinks, like he hadn’t realised he’d actually revealed how he felt. He blinks again, and then busts out into the widest, happiest grin Eddie’s ever seen in his life. Eddie matches it easily.

“You do?” Richie asks, somehow so unsure.

“Fuck yeah,” Eddie answers nodding.

“Maybe fuck yeah can be our always.”

“Why the fuck are you quoting *The Fault In Our Stars* at me after we say I love you for the first time?”

“I honestly don’t know,” Richie admits, still smiling just as widely as before. “I think you saying you love me has short-circuited my brain, Eddie Spaghetti. It’s not firing on all cylinders at the moment.”

“Is it ever?” Eddie teases, going easily when Richie hoists him onto his lap.

“Your barbs can’t hurt me anymore, Nurse K. You just admitted you love me.” His eyes sparkle when he says the word – *love*. “You love me. L-O-V-E love. Like, Eddie and Richie sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-“

Eddie cuts Richie’s awful singing off by doing the real thing.

ONE YEAR LATER

“It’s not going to fit, Richie.”

“I know that, Eds, but we’re not talking about my dick right now, we’re talking about the couch.”

“Jesus fucking Christ, remind me why I agreed to move in with you again?”

“Because you love me, Spaghetti Head. Duh.”

Even more than a year on from the first time they said that word to each other, Richie’s eyes still radiate pure, unadulterated joy every time it’s mentioned.

“You got me there,” Eddie concedes, moving in to smile a kiss against Richie’s mouth.

“That was the first meme I ever sent you,” Richie remembers, leaning away to wipe a non-existent tear from his eye. “Such beautiful memories we’ve woven together, huh, Eds?”

“If you discount all your ridiculous memes, then yes, we have.”

Richie smiles and bends back in to kiss Eddie again.

The year they’ve spent together hasn’t all been perfect, by any stretch

of the imagination.

It had been tough convincing Bill that Richie wasn't the person he behaved as that night. Bill is protective over Eddie, fiercely so after everything. He didn't know Richie the way Eddie and Bev did, in a way that meant the two of them understood completely that Richie was genuine, that he was brought up in a shitty environment and therefore could sometimes be a product of it – but that he wanted to be better than that.

It took months, but eventually Bill began to understand as well. Eventually he came to know Richie the way Eddie and Bev did. Richie spent those months proving himself to Bill, time and time again, happy to do it even when it seemed futile, like Bill would never be happy about him and Eddie being together.

“I get it,” Richie had said one night, tangled in bed together with Eddie, words whispered against Eddie's skin. “Bill loves you. He wants to protect you. And that night, I seemed to be something you needed to be protected from. But I love you too, Eds, and I'll spend the rest of my life proving that to Bill, and to you. Hopefully, one day, Bill will see that.”

Eddie knew that day had come the first time he saw Bill smile when he came home to Eddie and Richie cuddling on the couch one Friday night.

Six months after Darren's first visit, the asshole had tried to get to Eddie again, turning up at Eddie and Bill's place unannounced. Eddie wasn't alone when he did – Richie was there, and so were Bill, Audra, Bev, and Ben. Eddie had barely caught a glimpse of the guy before the rest of them descended, bodily removing him from the apartment but not letting him leave the premises until the cops got there.

When Bill had seen the bruises on Eddie all those years ago, he'd taken pictures. Eddie hadn't known that Bill still had those photos.

“I w-worried that this might happen,” Bill had explained as he showed Eddie the pictures that same evening. “I th-think you should use them, Eddie. I think you should use them and get a r-restraining order against that asshole.”

Eddie did exactly that. It went through easier than ABC.

But some of this year – is has been perfect.

Like when Richie had got his promotion at the station, *finally* being allowed on air. He hosted the evening show – seven ‘til ten – and the reception had been great, even after only his first few weeks. The station were so impressed that they gave Richie free reign to play whatever music he wanted, and – unfortunately – use whatever Voices he pleased. Funnily enough, the reception to the Voices was probably the best of all.

Whenever Eddie’s working during those hours, he’ll insist that they turn the radio at the nurse’s station up as loud as can be permitted.

“That’s my boyfriend,” he’ll tell whoever’s closest to him proudly.

He’s so dewy-eyed about it, even Jenny with the British boyfriend rolls her eyes at him.

And like when Bev and Ben got engaged, and the engagement party was held at her and Richie’s place. Bev had been beautiful, beaming and gushing at everyone who spoke to her, most of all Ben. The look of immense, immeasurable happiness on Ben’s face could have melted even the coldest of hearts.

“What kinda rings do you like, Eds?” Richie had asked as the party wound down.

“Fuck off, Trashmouth,” Eddie had scoffed, elbowing Richie and rolling his eyes.

“I’m not kidding,” Richie had said, and the seriousness in his tone had given Eddie pause. “One day, Eds. That’s gonna be us.”

Eddie absolutely believes him.

And like now, today, moving into their new place together. It’s nothing at all special, just a one-bedroom house in a not awful part of town. It’s furnished with bits and pieces they’ve managed to pull together from friends and on favours, neither of them earning enough to splash out on anything brand new. Their collective friends are all

downstairs, doing the grunt work of unloading the moving truck while Richie and Eddie assess upstairs for where everything should go once it's up the perilous, winding stairs.

"You still with me, Spaghetti Man?"

There's humour in Richie's tone and expression as he removes Eddie from his thoughts.

"Yeah," Eddie says simply, wrapping his arms around Richie's waist and pulling him in for a tight hug, cheek pressed against Richie's chest. "Just thinking about how perfect my life is."

Richie kisses the top of Eddie's head. "Fuckin' tell me about, Eds."

Eddie smiles.

Thank fuck I let Bill swipe right on this douchebag, he thinks.

Author's Note:

Hope you enjoyed!! I'm VERY open to Reddie prompts over on Tumblr if anyone wants to throw any my way - keeerys.tumblr.com